

EVIL DAYS

30 YEARS OF WAR AND
FAMINE IN ETHIOPIA



A Division of Human Rights Watch

EVIL DAYS

Thirty Years of War and Famine in Ethiopia

An Africa Watch Report

Human Rights Watch

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This One



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Africa Watch

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PREFACE

This report was initially planned at a time when it was not possible for Africa Watch to undertake research in government-held areas of Ethiopia, and access to rebel-held areas had not yet been obtained. Primary research consisted of interviews with refugees and other Ethiopians abroad. After the fall of the Mengistu government, access is now possible, and extensive research in all parts of Ethiopia would be able to paint a much more detailed picture of the abuses associated with the war. However, for reasons of time, that research remains to be done. This should be the task of an investigative commission set up by the new government.

Instead, the report relies heavily on secondary sources, including relief workers, journalists, and others who have travelled to Ethiopia or who have talked to Ethiopians. As a result, there are many blank areas: whole campaigns, particularly in the south, have scarcely been documented at all in this report. Another result is that in some cases the incidents reported cannot be fully cross-checked with independent sources. Where reported by sources known to be generally reliable, such incidents have been included. The source and status of information that has not been independently verified has been indicated.

Previous reports on human rights abuses in Ethiopia which have been compiled without visits to government-held areas have been subject to criticism, chiefly from defenders of the previous government, that such sources are wholly biased and unreliable. On these grounds a highly critical report by Cultural Survival on the government's resettlement program¹ was dismissed by Professor Richard Pankhurst² and Mr Kurt Jansson, head of the UN famine relief operation in Ethiopia.³ As shown in chapter 12, those dismissals were premature.

In compiling this report, Africa Watch has used as extensive a range of sources as possible. Between 1978 and 1988, the Ethiopian government denied the existence of the war altogether, and at no time did

¹ Cultural Survival (Jason W. Clay and Bonnie K. Holcombe), *Politics and the Ethiopian Famine 1984-1985*, Cambridge, Mass., 1985.

² Richard Pankhurst, "The Ethiopian Famine: Cultural Survival's Report Assessed," *Anthropology Today*, 2.3, June 1986, pp. 4-5.

³ Kurt Jansson, Michael Harris and Angela Penrose, *The Ethiopian Famine*, London, 1987, p. 26.

it allow independent access to the war zones. There is virtually no reliable information available about human rights abuses associated with the war from official Ethiopian sources. The Ethiopian government displayed an unhealthy obsession with statistics, and ostensibly-precise numbers for damage to property and "affected populations" form the greater part of its assessment of the impact of the wars and famines. Given that the government consistently overlooked the existence of a million people in Tigray, and invented half a million returning refugees who did not exist, such figures must be treated with caution.

Concerning famine, Africa Watch has made extensive use of official documents, aid agency reports and the research undertaken by Ethiopian and foreign scholars working in government-held areas. In many cases it is necessary to "read between the lines" as these scholars were anxious not to endanger their sources, careers, liberty or lives by telling the truth in plain words.

A significant part of the information contained in this report originates from the reports, newspaper articles, diaries and testimonies of foreign visitors to areas controlled by the rebel fronts, principally the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF, which after January 1989 was the leading member of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, EPRDF). Though these fronts gave greater access to the war zones, that access was never unrestricted. Visitors were usually accompanied by armed guards, primarily to protect them from government saboteurs, but which also identified them with the relevant front. The information obtained is therefore less than ideally independent. However, no visitor -- including those who were unsympathetic to the fronts and subsequently wrote critical reports of their activities -- has made a substantial criticism of his or her access to the civilian population, or come away with the belief that the people he or she spoke to were influenced by the presence of EPLF or TPLF-EPRDF⁴ representatives. Consequently, some of this information has been used, after careful scrutiny and cross-checking.

Much of the information obtained by visitors to rebel-held areas consists of eye-witness accounts of atrocities and their aftermath; this is not subject to the same problems of potential distortion.

Other information originates from refugees. In refugee camps, independent access to civilians is possible. Refugee testimony cannot be regarded as distorted simply because the refugee has made a political

⁴ The designation TPLF-EPRDF is intended to encompass the TPLF from its inception up until the formation of the EPRDF, and the EPRDF thereafter.

statement by fleeing his or her country; neither of course can it be used uncritically. In addition, contrary to the allegations of some defenders of the government, many refugees (particularly in the late 1980s) fled to neighboring countries precisely because they were unsympathetic to the rebel fronts. For example, most of the refugees who arrived in Sudan from Eritrea in 1988/9 were not supporters of the EPLF: displaced civilians who supported the EPLF had remained behind in relief camps run by the EPLF and the Eritrean Relief Association.

The EPLF and TPLF-EPRDF also displayed an abiding preoccupation with numbers. These may or may not have been more accurate than government figures. On the rare occasions when these figures have been alluded to, their origin and our view of their reliability has been noted.

This report covers abuses by all sides. Where documented, abuses by the rebel fronts have been included as well as those committed by the government. However, the great majority of abuses against civilians, and actions leading to famine, were committed by the government. The fronts certainly had authoritarian political structures and tolerated little dissent in their own ranks, but -- like the government's crackdown on the institutions of civil society -- such abuses fall outside the scope of this report.

The relative paucity of rebel abuses noted in these pages is not a matter of the absence of reliable sources of critical information on the activities of the fronts. All the fronts have their dissenters, who are fiercely critical of certain of their actions and policies. These people have provided information on some abuses by the fronts, but generally agree that the treatment of civilians and prisoners of war has been good, even exemplary. These critics include refugees interviewed in Sudan.

This report does not seek to justify or condemn the decision by rebel fronts to engage in armed struggle, nor the decision by the government to respond with military action. Africa Watch's mandate does not extend to directly promoting peace. Instead the focus is on the manner in which the wars were fought.

Statistics

This report contains discussions of the available statistics for the number of deaths attributable to the famines and forced relocations in Ethiopia, and the controversy over the size of the population of Tigray. The technical aspects of statistical analysis and demographic modelling have been kept to a minimum. The reason for the inclusion of this material is that it is important to know how many people suffered and

died. It is the least respect that is due to the victims to have the fact of their living and dying taken seriously.

The United Nations and other concerned institutions have been remarkably cavalier about the numbers of people who died, especially in the 1983-5 famine. Usually the figure of one million famine deaths is quoted for 1983-5. This figure has absolutely no scientific basis whatsoever. It is a trivialization and dehumanization of human misery for such a figure to be produced without even a minimal pretense at a systematic investigation. If the UN were to be equally cavalier about numbers of political detainees, or numbers of people killed when security forces fire on protesters, it would be rightly condemned as ignorant and irresponsible. Yet in Ethiopia and other countries which receive little international attention, it appears able to quote wholly fictional figures for famine deaths and remain unchallenged.

It is now too late for a proper demographic investigation into famine mortality during 1983-5, and Africa Watch lacks the resources to carry out such an inquiry in any case. The analysis is therefore very cursory, and based on existing surveys. Nevertheless, it is the first time that such an analysis has been done, and it certainly provides a more accurate assessment of the human impact of the famine than other figures produced to date. Throughout, lower figures for deaths have been used, so all estimates err on the side of caution (or optimism).⁵

Geographical Terms

Ethiopia is beset by conflicting territorial claims; the status of Eritrea is only the best-known instance. Eritrea is referred to as a "territory", a word that aspires to be neutral between the conflicting claims that it is a province and that it is by right an independent country. In addition, the provinces that existed under Haile Selassie had their boundaries and names revised on certain occasions, became "administrative regions" after the revolution, and then were completely reconstituted in 1987, with the introduction of a larger number of regions and some autonomous zones. This report used the term "province" to refer to geographical and administrative entities such as Harerghe and Shewa in the form in which they existed up to 1987. "Gonder" is used for the province formerly known as "Begemdir". There are conflicting claims as to the geographical extent of Tigray. Purely for convenience, the smaller

⁵ This is contrary to the general practice of citing only the upper limits to estimates of famine mortality.

government-defined Tigray is used in this report; the Tigrinya-speaking areas of north Gonder and Wollo claimed by the TPLF are generally referred to as the "borderlands" of Tigray. The post-1987 names and boundaries are not used, because they were instituted only very late in the day, and only incompletely. "The Ogaden" is used to refer to the lowland area of Harerghe, Bale and eastern Sidamo inhabited by ethnic Somalis, most of whom belong to the Ogadeni clan.

Acknowledgements

This report was researched and written by Alex de Waal, Associate Director of Africa Watch. It was made possible by the cooperation of many people who have lived, worked or fought in Ethiopia, or who have worked with refugees in neighboring countries. Many of these people are credited in the text, others have had to remain anonymous.

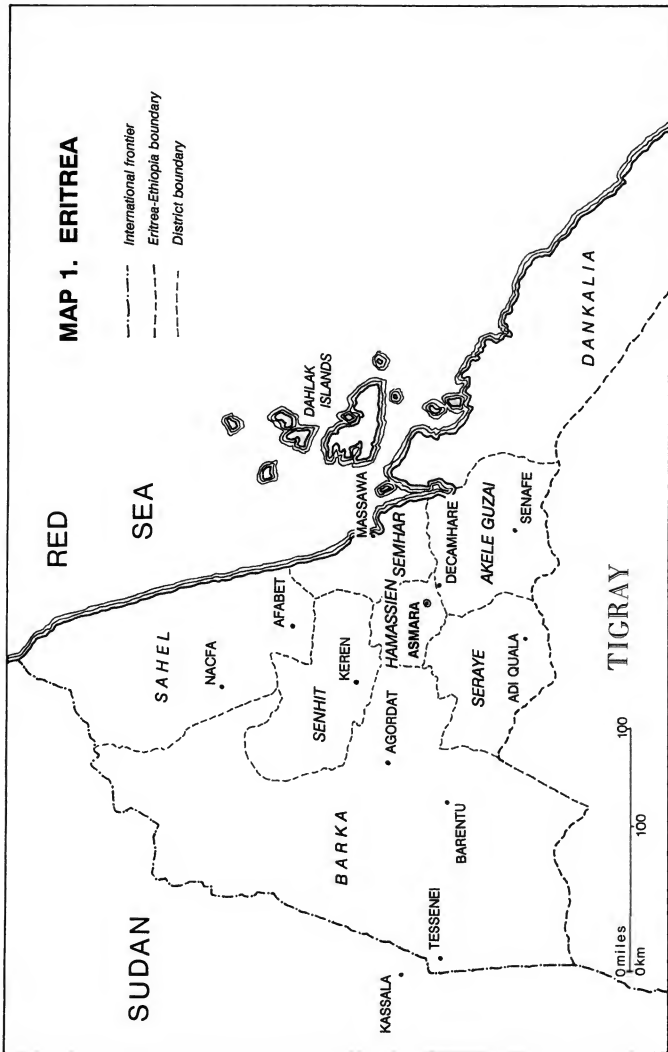
This report is dedicated to the many unknown victims of thirty years of war and famine in Ethiopia.

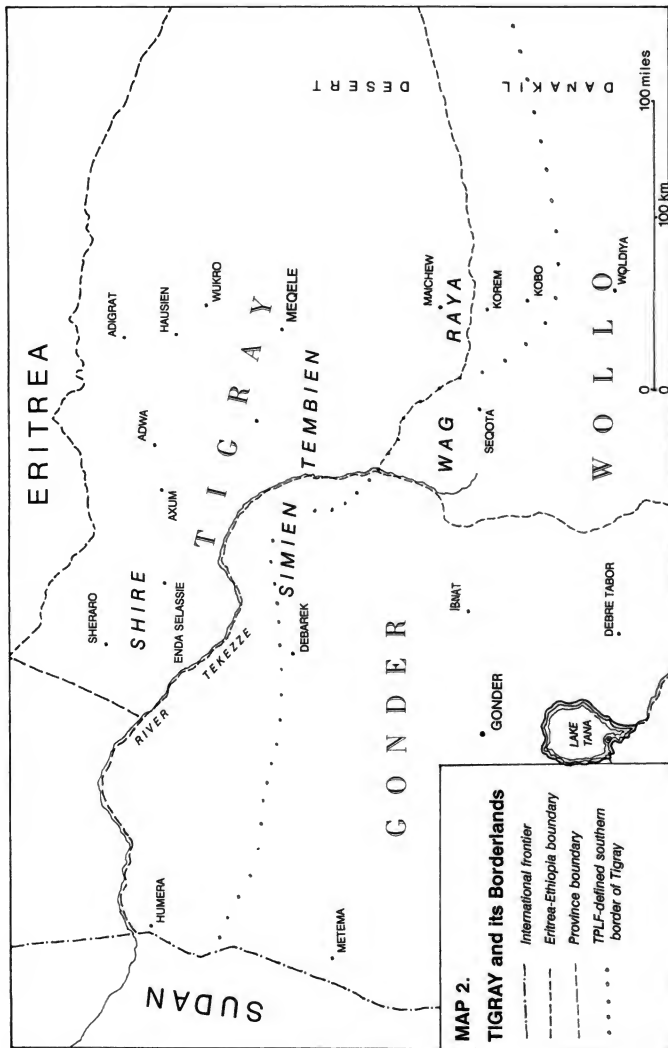
Glossary of Acronyms

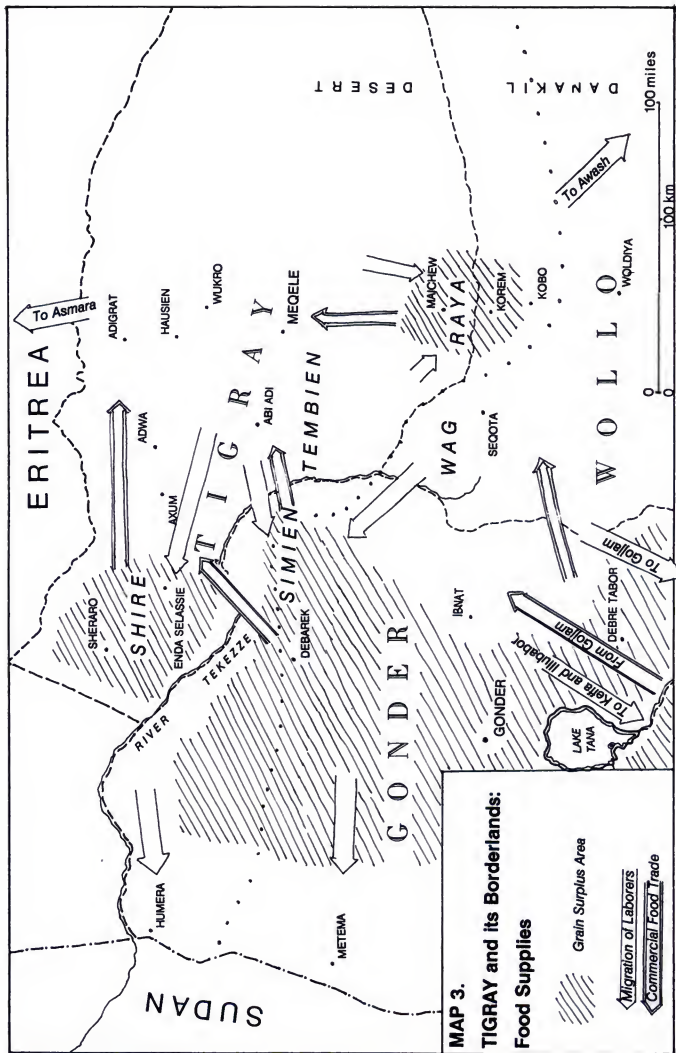
ALF	Afar Liberation Front
AMC	Agricultural Marketing Corporation
Birr	Ethiopian Dollar (approx. equal to US\$0.47)
Dergue	Provisional Military Administrative Committee (government after 1974)
EDU	Ethiopian Democratic Union
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
EPDM	Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (a part of EPRDF)
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
EPRP	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party
ERA	Eritrean Relief Association
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
Kebele	Urban Dwellers' Association
MEISON	All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement
MT	Metric tons
OIF	Oromo Islamic Front
OLF	Oromo Liberation Front
PA	Peasant Association
REST	Relief Society of Tigray
RRC	Relief and Rehabilitation Commission
SALF	Somali Abo Liberation Front
Shifta	Bandit
SNM	Somali National Movement
SPLA	Sudan People's Liberation Army
TPLF	Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (a part of EPRDF)
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WPE	Workers' Party of Ethiopia
WSLF	Western Somali Liberation Front

MAP 1. ERITREA




- International frontier
- Eritrea-Ethiopia boundary
- District boundary

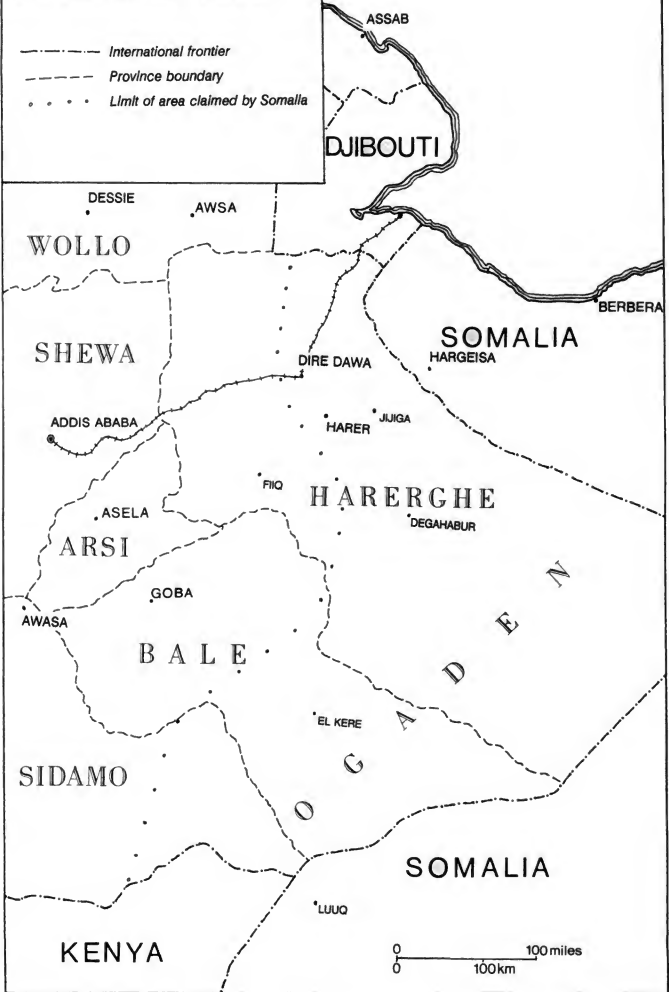


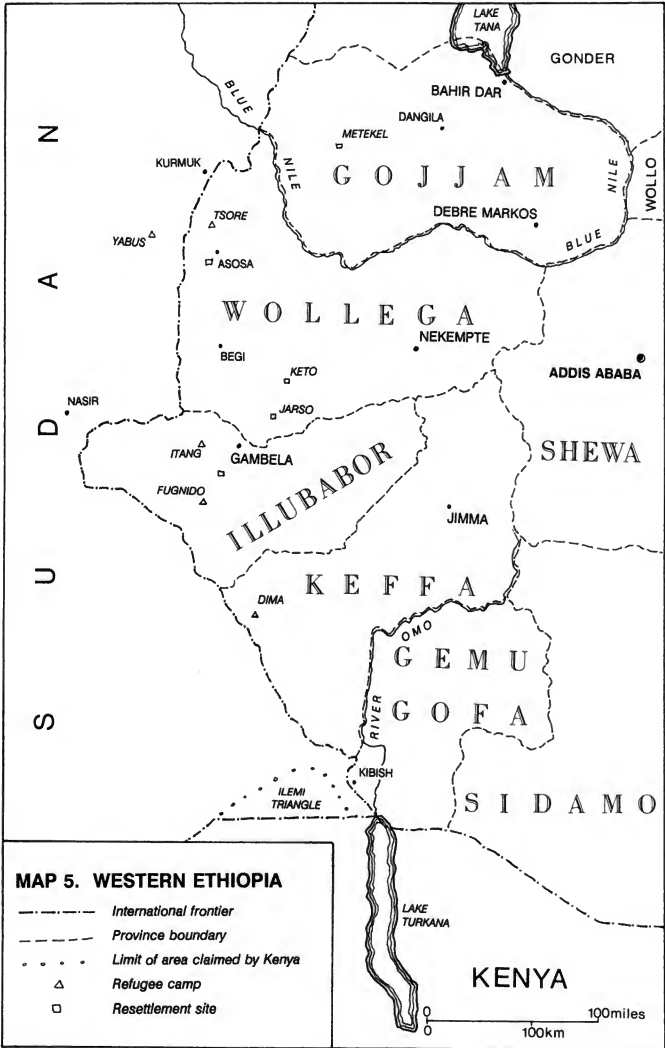




MAP 4. EASTERN ETHIOPIA

-  International frontier
-  Province boundary
-  Limit of area claimed by Somalia





INTRODUCTION

In May 1991 there was a dramatic change of government in Ethiopia, in which the government of former President Mengistu Haile Mariam was militarily defeated by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). If the new government of Ethiopia and the administration in Eritrea abide by their promises of ensuring democracy and respect for human rights, there is the very real prospect that war and famine will be banished, for the first time in a generation.

This report is concerned with the thirty years of wars and famines in Ethiopia between September 1961 and the overthrow of the Mengistu government in May 1991. The starting date is inevitably somewhat arbitrary: alternatives could have been chosen at various dates between 1960 and 1966. September 1, 1961, was the occasion of the first armed clash between the newly-formed Eritrean Liberation Front and the army, and is generally recognized by Ethiopians as the "official" outbreak of the war in Eritrea. Other wars started at dates ranging from 1962 to 1975.

Why this Report Now?

The principal wars in Ethiopia are now over. It is now too late to influence the policies of the Mengistu government, or those of the international community towards that government. Yet there are a number of reasons for continuing concern with the past. One is that justice demands that many of those were responsible for perpetrating human rights abuses during the war should be brought to trial. Africa Watch welcomes the promise by the new government headed by the EPRDF that such trials will take place in accordance with internationally-accepted norms of due process and in the presence of international observers. This report, while not intended to provide the specific evidence needed to obtain criminal convictions against individuals for violations of the humanitarian laws of war, documents the range and extent of abuses that such trials should be concerned with.

A second reason is that the sufferings of the Ethiopian people need to be documented. The minimum duty of a human rights organization to the hundreds of thousands of victims of war and famine is to record their plight, so that they are not forgotten by history, and that history is not rewritten to conceal or distort embarrassing facts. In order to understand the problems facing the peoples of Ethiopia at the present time, it is also necessary to understand the horrors they have suffered.

A third reason is that the documentation of the abuses inflicted upon the civilian population by successive Ethiopian governments leads directly to an obligation on present and future governments not to repeat the same crimes. By showing that the methods of counter-insurgency warfare adopted in Ethiopia have led to a wide range of abuses, Africa Watch hopes to discourage the adoption of such methods in future, not only in Ethiopia but in other countries as well. When governments face insurgencies, their response must be constrained by human rights considerations.

In addition, the analysis of the genesis of famine contained in this report has broad implications. The repeated famines that have struck Ethiopia, and in particular the great famine of 1983-5, were in large part created by government policies, especially counter-insurgency strategies.

It is possible that, at the time, neither government, army nor international relief agencies were fully aware of the way in which these actions were creating exceptionally severe famine. Members of these institutions could thus plead ignorance when faced with the unacceptable consequences of what they did and failed to do. Ignorance is the flimsiest of excuses, especially when -- as in this instance -- there was a notable lack of investigation into the causes of the famine. After the examination of the evidence which we have relied on in compiling this report, no such plea of ignorance should be acceptable in the future. This report is intended to demonstrate conclusively, not only that war created famine, but that particular strategies which the government adopted to fight the wars created a particularly severe form of famine. Moreover, international aid supplied to the government and to relief agencies working alongside the government became part of the counter-insurgency strategy of the government, and thus -- while meeting real and immediate need -- also served to further the government's war aims, and prolong its life.

The findings of this report therefore have implications, not only for the Ethiopian government and other governments faced with insurgencies, but for relief agencies faced with the humanitarian needs resulting from civil strife elsewhere in the world. This report raises disturbing questions about the nature of the relationship between humanitarian agencies and the host government. It calls into question the ethic of relieving actual suffering wherever it is to be found, without preconditions other than safe access and accountability for donations given. In the wider context of a counter-insurgency operation, the supply of such relief may actually extend, intensify, or legitimize that counter-insurgency operation, which is creating more suffering than is being relieved by the humanitarian intervention. This is a tough ethical dilemma with no easy solutions, but

one that must be faced and debated by the international community. Putting conditions on the provision of humanitarian assistance is bound to provoke the criticism of "playing politics with the hungry." But, when more powerful actors are already playing politics with the hungry, for a relief agency to ignore this fact is naive and may merely result in it becoming their unwitting tool.

Main Findings

Violence against Civilians

The most characteristic feature of the war has been indiscriminate violence against civilians by the Ethiopian army and air force. The army deliberately killed and wounded tens of thousands of civilians and the air force bombed civilians and civilian targets. It is not possible to produce an accurate estimate for the number of innocent people killed over the decades, but it undoubtedly exceeds 150,000 (leaving aside those killed by famine and the resettlement program). The atrocities discussed in this report are but a fraction of the total number which occurred, although most of the major massacres, especially in the north, are mentioned. Every investigation uncovers more abuses, and many investigations into massacres already documented discover more victims -- injured people who died later and forgotten victims who had no relatives in the vicinity to pronounce them missing. Very few incidents of killings turn out to be less than has been reported.

Deaths from the war will continue even after the fighting is over, because many areas remain heavily mined, and unexploded munitions lie buried in many marketplaces, fields and roads, waiting to claim victims.

These gross violations have occurred consistently over thirty years. Some years have been worse than others, but throughout the rule of the Emperor Haile Selassie, his immediate successors, and Colonel (later President) Mengistu Haile Mariam, there was no significant attempt to curtail such abuses.

Counter-Insurgency Strategy

Throughout the war, the government followed a more-or-less consistent set of counter-insurgency strategies, with significant variations. These consisted of:

- (1) The forcible relocation and control of much of the rural population, using protected villages, forced resettlement from the insurgent zone, and restrictions on movement.
- (2) The systematic restriction of food supplies (both commercial and relief) in insurgent areas, by cutting key roads or by bombing marketplaces and transport links.
- (3) The use of indiscriminate violence and exemplary terror against civilians who remained outside the controlled zones, using both ground forces and aerial bombardment.
- (4) The fostering of divisions within the insurgent movements, and the use of rebel forces opposed to neighboring governments to fight against insurgents inside Ethiopia.

The strategies were implemented differently in different parts of the country. Villagization was enforced in the southeast, the west and Eritrea, but not in Tigray, where restrictions on movement, forcible resettlement (after late 1984) and the use of terror were used instead.

This combination of strategies is familiar from many insurgencies around the world. The Ethiopian case stands out as particularly destructive because of the extraordinarily prolonged level of sustained violence, and the frequent lack of any compensatory assistance to the relocated and restricted population. Because of the fragile rural economy and the dependence of rural people on mobility and a range of economic activities, this was particularly damaging, and a major contributor to famine.

The Creation of Famine

One consequence of the government's military policies, particularly during the early 1980s, was the creation of famine. The great famine of 1983-5 is officially ascribed to drought. While climatic adversity and related factors certainly played a part in the tragedy, closer investigation shows that widespread drought occurred only some months after the famine was already under way, and that information on food production and food prices gives an account which contradicts important elements of the drought hypothesis.

In recent years, "war and drought" has become the favored explanation for famine. This is closer to the truth, but remains vague. It is not war itself that creates famine, but war fought in particular ways.

The most important factors explaining the famine are the counter-insurgency strategy adopted by the government, and restrictions and burdens imposed on the population of non-insurgent areas in the name of social transformation.

Repeated military offensives destroyed the crops in surplus-producing areas, and with them much rural employment. The bombing of marketplaces restricted rural trade and exchange, impeding the redistribution of the surpluses that existed locally. In the areas where the government retained some control, restrictions on migration, labor and trade, and policies of forcible relocation in protected villages, served to prevent hungry people from utilizing time-honored strategies for obtaining food, by labor migration and petty trade.

These restrictions were enforced far beyond the areas of insurgent activity, partly from fear that the insurgency would spread, and partly from ambitions for socialist transformation. Other burdens on the peasantry such as punitively high delivery quotas of staple grains to the Agricultural Marketing Corporation and heavy taxation also contributed to the famine. Economic policies themselves are not within the mandate of a human rights organization. However, when these policies are implemented with a ferocity and single-mindedness that leaves no room for dissent leading to possible revision, and when they do in the event contribute to famine, at least the manner in which they are enforced warrants consideration as an abuse of basic human rights.

Some responses to the famine only served to make matters worse. The government's resettlement program was a disaster when considered from almost any angle, and killed a minimum of 50,000 people. The large-scale provision of food relief to the government-controlled areas of the north was a controversial initiative, which allowed the government to extend its control to contested areas, and maintain that control longer than would otherwise have been the case. Despite the fact that the government had access to only a minority of the famine-stricken population in the north, the great majority of relief was channelled through the government side. This almost certainly prolonged the war: the rebel fronts only regained the military position they held in 1983/4 (at the beginning of the famine), some four to five years later.

The famine of 1983-5 in northern Ethiopia is estimated to have killed a minimum of 400,000 people (not counting those killed by resettlement). Something over half of this mortality can be attributed to human rights abuses causing the famine to come earlier, strike harder, and extend further than would otherwise have been the case. Famine also struck other areas of Ethiopia, for similar reasons, causing tens of thousands of

deaths. The famines of 1973-5 killed at least 40,000 in Wollo and 55,000 in the Ogaden; the famine of 1965/6 also killed tens of thousands.

The Treatment of Soldiers

Soldiers were victims of the war too. At least 100,000 soldiers were killed. From the mid-1970s onwards, the government was continually increasing the size of its army, which numbered over 450,000 by 1990. Conscripts were increasingly obtained by forceful and deceitful means, such as press-ganging or using food aid as a bait. Many were below the age limit for military service according to international and domestic law. In the army, they were subjected to a range of abuses, including summary execution for disciplinary offenses. While not formally conscripted, women were subjected to rape and kidnapping by soldiers. The EPLF and Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF, a founder member of the EPRDF in January 1989) treated prisoners of war well, though the International Committee of the Red Cross had disagreements with both fronts concerning the latter's access. Prisoners of war were attacked by government airplanes, and were subject to detention and torture or worse by the government following their release. The Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) and Somali army treated prisoners less well, and frequently killed them. The rebel fronts also used methods of conscription which on occasion were violent.

Inflaming Local and Neighboring Conflicts

Deliberately or inadvertently, the Ethiopian government inflamed other conflicts. It supported insurgent groups in Sudan and Somalia, which committed human rights abuses. The destabilization of border areas and the availability of modern weaponry through the market or through militias and insurgents in neighboring countries helped to make local disputes between ethnic groups more violent. Several small groups in southwest Ethiopia have suffered severely from the depredations of their well-armed neighbors, as a direct if unforeseen consequence of government policy.

The Record of the Rebel Fronts

The rebel fronts committed abuses against civilians and prisoners of war. Some of the rebel fronts have extremely poor human rights records. However, in the case of the EPLF and TPLF-EPRDF, these abuses were on a much smaller scale than those committed by the government forces.

The policies of respecting civilians were the EPLF's and TPLF-EPRDF's "secret weapon," and meant that with every atrocity committed by the government, more civilians supported -- at least passively -- the rebels. Similarly, the released prisoners of war were the best propagandists for the rebel cause within the government army. The history of the war is therefore, in a very real sense, a demonstration of the futility of evil.

The war in the north was essentially not fought between the government army and the fronts; it was fought between the army and large sections of the people. It is this asymmetry between the contending parties that was the major reason why one side behaved in a manner radically unlike the other. It was an appreciation of this fact that enabled the fronts to win.

The Impact on Civil Politics

With one exception, this report does not deal directly with civil institutions, either in government- or rebel-held areas of the country. This exception is chapter 6, which deals with the Red Terror of 1977/8, in which the urban insurgency of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) was crushed by the government, in the process killing a minimum of 10,000 educated people and suppressing any form of dissent for over a decade. This bloody episode was civil repression turned into all out warfare, which is the principal reason why it is included in this report.

More generally, the wars seriously stunted the growth of civil society in Ethiopia. The war was an excuse for the indefinite continuation of military rule -- albeit under a civilian mask during 1987-90 -- and the creation and maintenance of security forces empowered to violate human rights with impunity; it was an excuse for severe censorship and the restriction of civil and political rights. Even after Marxism-Leninism was formally abandoned by President Mengistu in March 1990, there was no progress towards the respect for civil and political rights, and even regression, with the establishment of a *de facto* state of emergency throughout the country, under military administrators.¹ One casualty of the war, not documented in this report, has been the stifling of any initiatives towards democracy, the rule of law, and the development of

¹ See: "Ethiopia: Mengistu's Empty Democracy," *News from Africa Watch*, March 5, 1991.

civil society. These will be documented in future Africa Watch publications.

The International Role

The international community has played a mixed role in Ethiopia's recent history. Until 1977, Ethiopia was a close ally of the United States, and received extensive military and economic assistance. Thereafter, it was a close ally of the USSR, and was shunned by the US, which provided no development nor military aid, and was a constant critic of government actions. Other western countries, such as members of the European Community, provided extensive economic assistance though not military supplies, although the west's ally Israel broke with that policy in 1989, when it supplied armaments in return for the emigration of the Ethiopian Jews.

Between 1977 and 1991 western aid to Ethiopia rose tenfold. Much of this aid was humanitarian famine relief. Though not achieving all that its proponents claim, this aid no doubt saved many lives and livelihoods. However, there is a more questionable side to aid. In the crucial year 1985, about 90 per cent of the aid was given to the government and to humanitarian agencies working on the government side, despite the fact that they had access to only a minority of the famine-affected population. Much assistance was given without scrutinizing the context in which it would be utilized, and in fact served to support the counter-insurgency strategies of the Mengistu government. Instances include the "rehabilitation" assistance to the southeast during 1980-2, the Food for the North Initiative of 1985-6, and the outpouring of aid in 1987-8. More generally, international assistance undoubtedly prolonged the Mengistu government's life.

The US government was consistently critical of the Mengistu government's human rights record. However, the main US investigation into government culpability in creating the famine was given a restricted agenda which obliged it to find the Ethiopian government "not guilty" of deliberately using starvation as a weapon of war. Had the investigation been mandated to examine a slightly broader set of issues and a longer time period, the verdict would have been much more likely to be "guilty." The British government was also critical, but to a lesser degree. Most other major donors did not include a significant consideration of human rights concerns in determining their relations with the Ethiopian government. The UN in particular was more eager to conceal evidence of abuses, especially those associated with famine and famine relief, than

expose them, and the European Community gave substantial aid with no questions asked.

The US was the only major donor to direct the majority of its assistance to the rebel held areas in 1989–91, in accordance with an objective assessment of the numbers of needy people to be found there.

During 1988–91, a major concern of Israel and the US was the population of Ethiopian Jews, known as Falashas. Israel supplied arms to the Ethiopian government in exchange for allowing the Falashas to leave. The US lobbied for the Falashas to be allowed to emigrate but objected to the arms supply.

Despite repeated approaches by the Mengistu government, the US refused to give economic or military assistance. Apart from humanitarian concerns and the Falasha issue, the US was active in trying to obtain a negotiated peace. The US was ultimately successful in assisting the handover of power from the Mengistu government to the EPRDF and EPLF with less bloodshed than would otherwise have occurred. This was achieved through persistent diplomatic efforts and through pragmatism, notably the abandonment of the long-standing US objection to Eritrean independence.

Structure

For the most part, this report is structured chronologically. Some parts may appear repetitive -- but the war was repetitive: there were thirteen major offensives in Eritrea alone, ten in Tigray, and a dozen in the southeast. Following the historical background, it breaks naturally into five sections, which cover the following periods, provinces and topics:

- (1) Insurgency and counter-insurgency under Haile Selassie and during the first years of the revolution, up to and including the Somali invasion (chapters 2–4).
- (2) Counter-insurgency in the years between 1978 and 1984, when the army was newly equipped and expanded with Soviet assistance, leading to victory over the insurgencies in the southeast, the Red Terror in the cities, and the creation of famine in the north (chapters 5–9).
- (3) The use of humanitarian relief for war and programs of social engineering, including pacification in Eritrea, the withholding of

relief from Tigray, resettlement and villagization, in the period 1985-8 (chapters 10-13).

- (4) War and famine during the last years of the Mengistu government, when the EPLF and TPLF-EPRDF had won the military advantage (chapters 14-16).
- (5) Neglected issues and regions: conscription and the treatment of soldiers and prisoners of war; the wars in the southwest, and the wars in the east including those involving Ethiopian refugees in Somalia (chapters 17-19).

A final chapter deals with the policies of western governments to Ethiopia, with a focus on the United States.

Wars and Famines, 1961-77

The "official" outbreak of the war in Eritrea was September 1961, when the army first engaged the forces of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF). Over the following decade the army acted in a brutal and destructive manner towards civilians and their villages, farms and animal herds. There were numerous massacres of civilians, hundreds of villages were burned, and much of the population was forced to relocate in fortified government villages. The worst atrocities occurred during 1967 and 1970-1. The ELF and the younger EPLF also engaged in abuses such as kidnappings and assassinations, and fought against each other.

Shortly after the 1974 revolution, the ELF and EPLF combined in a major attempt to defeat the army in Asmara. 1975 was to be the most bloody year of the war to date. The government continued to use indiscriminate violence against civilians, it instituted a food blockade of the Eritrean highlands, and tried to mobilize a huge peasant army to overwhelm the fronts by sheer weight of numbers.

From the start, the policies of scorched earth and the use of a food blockade as a weapon meant that the war was fought at the cost of creating hunger among the civilian population.

Haile Selassie also faced insurrections in the northern provinces. In the 1960s the main such revolt was in Gojjam, due to discontent over taxation and land measurement. In Wollo, inter-ethnic fighting in the lowlands, coupled with government-promoted or sanctioned processes of land alienation and enforcement of crippling tenancy agreements in times of drought all contributed to the creation of famine in 1972-4, a famine made worse by the government's concealment of it and refusal to consider

assistance. After the revolution, there were insurgencies led by feudal leaders in all the northern provinces. The suppression of the Afar revolt in 1975 was particularly bloody and led to much loss of civilian life.

In the southeastern part of Ethiopia there were two separate insurgencies during the 1960s and 1970s. One insurgency was in the Ogaden, where the WSLF, supported by the Somali government, was active. The second insurgency involved a number of Oromo movements; in the 1960s led by Wako Gutu in Bale and Sheikh Hussein in Harerghe, in the 1970s led by the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and Somali Abo Liberation Front (SALF). The government's military response included indiscriminate violence against civilians and war against the economic base — killing animals, poisoning wells, cutting food supplies, and restricting movement. These military strategies were instrumental in creating the famines which struck the area in 1973–4.

In 1977 the Somali army invaded the Ethiopian Ogaden, first secretly and then openly, leading to a large-scale conventional war. Both sides in the war committed abuses against the civilian population.

Counter-Insurgency, 1978–84

In 1977 a number of simultaneous military changes occurred which heralded a significant break with the past. These included: the Somali invasion of the Ogaden, Ethiopia's break with the US and the turn to the USSR, the massive enlargement and re-equipment of the army, the prosecution of the Red Terror, and the undisputed ascendancy of Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam.

The defeat of the Somali army in 1978 was followed by six years of intense counter-insurgency warfare against the forces of the WSLF and the OLF. The continuing war was waged largely in secret, and ended in the defeat of the WSLF and the eclipse of the OLF. Other rebel fronts such as the SALF and the Sidama Liberation Front were also defeated. The government strategy included:

- * Repeated military offensives, involving many abuses against civilians, including indiscriminate aerial bombardment of villages.
- * A policy of forcible relocation in protected villages.
- * The use of Somali opposition movements to fight against the WSLF.
- * Pressure on Somalia and the international community to obtain the repatriation of refugees.

A particularly insidious element in the government strategy was the utilization of international humanitarian aid for counter-insurgency purposes.

1977/8 also was the year of the Red Terror, in which Colonel Mengistu crushed the urban opposition of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) by a massive campaign of killing, detention and torture, and intimidation. Later, the terror was turned on the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement, the government's erstwhile ally. Tens of thousands of young people were killed, and the government became addicted to the use of terror as a weapon of war.

The Mengistu government was simultaneously fighting an intensified war in Eritrea, seeking to crush the Eritrean insurgency with a vastly-expanded and re-equipped army and air force. The years 1978-84 saw an expansion of the scorched earth and forced relocation policies of earlier years, together with saturation bombing of areas of rebel strength. A series of large-scale offensives culminated in the huge "Red Star" offensive of 1982. These years witnessed the demise of the ELF, and the retreat of the EPLF to the mountainous Sahel district close to Sudan. Government policies led to wholesale ecological destruction, which, together with the damage to livelihoods caused by the war and restrictions, were major factors creating famine.

Meanwhile, in Tigray, the government faced the insurgency of the TPLF, which was fighting a classic guerrilla war throughout the province. The government's counter-insurgency strategy included:

- (1) Military offensives into the TPLF heartlands, which were also the richer, surplus-producing districts of the province.
- (2) The bombing of marketplaces to disrupt commerce.
- (3) The imposition of strict bans on the movement of petty traders and migrant laborers.

As well as directly causing large-scale civilian suffering and death, this combination of policies meant that the normal processes of redistribution of surplus grain to poorer areas and migration of seasonal laborers to richer areas were no longer able to occur, leading to intense famine in the food deficit areas. A close investigation of the evidence for drought and production failures confirms that these cannot account for the timing, severity or extent of the famine of 1983-5. Instead, an analysis of the timing and location of the major offensives of 1980-1, 1983 and 1984, and the timing and scope of the restrictions, confirms that the

government's counter-insurgency strategy was the prime culprit for the disaster.

Simultaneously, a set of restrictions and impositions were placed upon rural people in government-controlled areas, including punitive taxation, requisitioning of food for the Agricultural Marketing Corporation, forced labor on government projects and state farms, and bans on labor, migration and trade. Poor people were often forced to sell their reserves of food to meet these demands, which were backed up by sanctions such as imprisonment. These brought large sections of the population close to the brink of famine. These policies were pursued partly for reasons of counter-insurgency and partly from ambitions for socialist transformation.

The famine killed in excess of 400,000 people. The human rights abuses made it come earlier, strike harder, and reach further. Most of these deaths can be attributed, not to the weather, but to the government's gross violations of human rights.

Humanitarian Relief as a Weapon of War, 1985-88

In late 1984 the famine reached the television screens of the west. This caused a massive inflow of relief, which was utilized by the government in its counter-insurgency strategy in the north. It coincided with renewed offensives in Eritrea and Tigray and the launching of the programs of resettlement and villagization.

The relief aid generously provided to the Ethiopian government and the humanitarian agencies working alongside it was a boon to the government's war plans. The politics of aid resulted in the government side receiving a disproportionate share of the assistance compared to the rebel-held areas. In Eritrea, aid was used as part of a military pacification strategy, with aid agencies moving in behind the military to secure newly-occupied areas. This allowed the government to score significant military successes in 1985, and to control areas it had been unable to hold on to before. Most aid agencies, in particular the United Nations, preferred not to face the dilemmas of providing aid in such a situation, and thus actively abetted the army's efforts. Some relief was supplied directly to the army and militia.

When counter-attacking in 1987, the EPLF disrupted the relief programs. These actions gained international condemnation, but the government continued to object to plans to allow safe passage to humanitarian supplies. The relief programs have also to be considered within the wider context of the pacification strategy.

In Tigray, the government preferred to withhold aid from the province, thus starving the people. The government attempted to conceal this fact,

and in doing so was abetted by the United Nations, which in August 1985 produced a mendacious report endorsing the government's claim that it was feeding most of the famine victims in Tigray, at a time when it was in fact feeding very few indeed. A huge army offensive into Tigray in 1985, as well as being particularly bloody and destructive, was aimed at preventing clandestine relief supplies coming across the Sudanese border to TPLF-held areas. Relief convoys, feeding centers and refugees were all attacked from the air. As in Eritrea, the government was able to make substantial military gains on account of the famine, but it also deeply alienated the rural people, who realized that they would never be free from famine while the Mengistu government remained in power. They were thus prepared to undergo great hardships in order to fight against it.

The government's main response to the famine was a gargantuan program of forced resettlement. This involved numerous abuses of human rights, including the violent and arbitrary manner in which resettlers were taken, appalling conditions in transit and on arrival, the displacement of indigenous people in the resettlement areas, and violence against resettlers who attempted to escape, including enslavement by soldiers of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). The resettlement program is estimated to have killed at least 50,000 people.

The famine period also saw the beginnings of a comprehensive villagization program. First implemented in the east as a counter-insurgency measure, it was spread to other areas as an attempt at social engineering. The implementation of this program also involved violence and coercion, especially in the war zones.

The EPLF and TPLF-EPRDF Ascendancy, 1988-91

Early 1988 marked another watershed, in which the rebel fronts in Eritrea and Tigray decisively gained the military initiative. The stalemate in the war was broken, and their military victory duly followed three years later. The government continued to fight the war with total disregard for the rights of civilians, and the army and air force engaged in reprisal killings of civilians. 1988 was a particularly bloody year in the war, during which the government cast aside all restraint in its repeated attacks on civilian targets. The massacre of 400 Eritrean civilians by the army at Sheib and the death of 1,800 people when the Tigrayan market town of Hausien was bombed are two of the most notorious examples.

In 1989 the TPLF defeated the army in Tigray and occupied the whole province. The government attempted to destroy what it could before leaving, and then sent bombing missions against major towns including

the capital, Meqele. In 1990, the EPLF captured the port of Massawa, which the government then tried to destroy using aerial bombardment. Meanwhile the war intensified in the provinces of Gonder and Wollo and spread to Gojjam and Shewa, where the army continued to commit numerous abuses against civilians. Abuses continued up until the last days of the Mengistu regime in May 1991 -- for example, just a few weeks before, over 100 Tigrayan prisoners were summarily executed in Gonder prison.

The years 1988-91 also saw continued food shortages, and belated efforts by the international community to ensure that civilians on all sides had access to relief. These plans were continually subject to political interference, to a certain extent by the fronts but very largely so on the part of the government. The besieged Eritrean capital, Asmara, witnessed the worst extremes of hunger during 1990-91, where military requisitioning of food and the imposition of a blockade created severe suffering. In Tigray, despite the exceptionally severe drought, severe famine was avoided because the TPLF did not impose the same burdens and restrictions on the populace as the government had done earlier in the decade.

Other Wars

From the 1960s, and increasing in intensity during the 1980s, there has been a series of wars in western and southwestern Ethiopia. These have included:

- * An insurgency by the EPRP in western Gojjam, against the Mengistu government and (latterly) the EPRDF.
- * An insurgency by the OLF in western Wollega, against the government. This and the war in Gojjam were also inflamed by the resettlement and villagization programs, and saw large-scale violations of human rights during 1989-91.
- * Conflict between the OLF and the SPLA, which had a wing of its own army inside Ethiopia, operating in alliance with the Ethiopian army. The SPLA committed atrocities against local civilians, and the OLF attacked a Sudanese refugee camp in 1990. The main exodus of Sudanese refugees back to Sudan in May-June 1991 was not, however, caused by attacks by the OLF or EPRDF.

- * Conflict between the Anuak of Illubabor province and the government, inflamed by resettlement, villagization and the presence of the SPLA.
- * Local warfare by pastoralist groups in Gamu Gofa who are either self-armed or armed by a neighbor. These wars are local disputes intensified by the selective availability of arms to certain groups following on alliances with pastoralist militias in southern Sudan. The Kenyan government has also been responsible for abuses against these pastoralists.

In eastern Ethiopia, following the defeat of the WSLF and OLF in the early 1980s, fragmented wars have continued on both sides of the Ethiopia-Somalia border. Both governments supported insurgent groups operating in each other's territory; Ethiopian refugees were armed by the Somali government, and the insurgent groups clashed with each other and with the two national armies. The war between the Somali National Movement (backed by Ethiopia) and a Somali-backed Oromo front, inside northern Somalia during 1988 was a result of this process of fragmentation and manipulation.

Following the EPRDF victory in May-June 1991, there was an upsurge of local violence in southern and eastern Ethiopia, involving banditry, inter-communal strife, and resistance to the imposition of any form of central authority.

The Total Impact

The cost to Ethiopia, in human, economic and social terms of the last thirty years of war and famine has been literally incalculable. According to the very conservative estimates contained in this report, the wars and famines have cost a minimum of one million lives, and possibly as many as 1.5 million. An even greater number have been wounded, traumatized, forced to flee as refugees, or have been displaced within the country. The economy is bankrupt, the natural environment irreparably damaged, the country torn apart, and the growth of civil politics aborted. The last thirty years have indeed been evil days.

Recommendations

Africa Watch's recommendations to the government of Ethiopia and the administration in Eritrea include:

- * That those primarily responsible for gross abuses of human rights be brought to trial, before an independent court, with due process of law.
- * That a permanent Human Rights Commission be set up with wide ranging powers to investigate allegations of human rights abuse.
- * That an inquiry into the causes of famine be set up.

Africa Watch considers that the aid donors need to reconsider carefully their role in providing humanitarian assistance in situations of armed conflict and human rights abuse. Africa Watch's recommendations to the aid donors include:

- * That they should cooperate with the inquiry into the causes of famine, and accept responsibility for any instances in which they have abetted or failed to prevent human rights abuses.
- * That they adopt human rights conditions for the delivery of emergency aid.

1. BACKGROUND TO WAR AND FAMINE IN ETHIOPIA

"The introduction of billeting into Gayint led to the death of a peasant. The king's response to an appeal for justice was terse. 'Soldiers eat, peasants provide.'¹

Histories of Ethiopia

There is no impartial history of Ethiopia: every presentation of historical facts is laden with modern-day political implications.

Ethiopia is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious state -- Christians and Moslems are present in approximately equal numbers, and there are also followers traditional religions and -- until very recently -- there was a community of Jews. Ethiopian nationalism, however, is largely based upon political and cultural symbols that derive from the Amhara-Tigray tradition of the northern highlands: Orthodox Christianity, an almost unbroken tradition of independence, literacy in the ancient Ge'ez script, and the use of ox-plough agriculture. One of the main reasons for the last thirty years of warfare has been the unwillingness of marginalized people in Ethiopia to accept the northern-highland definition of national identity.

Ethiopia as we know it today is the product of the expansion of a state centered in the northern highlands into adjoining areas, mostly to the south. The northern highlands are inhabited by the Amhara and Tigray, who are culturally and politically dominant, and a range of minorities, notably the Agau. The Ethiopian Jews, known as Falasha, are ethnically a sub-category of the Agau. The states located in this region claim a continuous tradition going back to the kingdom of Axum in the early middle-ages and beforehand, to the offspring of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Until 1974, the Emperors claimed to rule by virtue of royal descent in the line of Solomon, and by being anointed by the Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Until the mid-twentieth century, this state was known as "Abyssinia," and in the historical context, will be called that in order to distinguish it from the larger area of modern-day Ethiopia. In the region, highland Amhara and Tigray are commonly called "habash," a word with the same derivation.

¹ Quoted in: Donald Crummey, "Banditry and Resistance: Noble and Peasant in 19th Century Ethiopia," in D. Crummey (ed.) *Banditry, Rebellion and Protest in Africa*, London, 1986, p. 142. The king in question was the Emperor Teodros, who ruled the northwestern part of modern-day Ethiopia from 1855 to 1868.

History lives in Ethiopia. The question of whether the ancient Abyssinian state controlled all or part of modern-day Eritrea generates acrimonious dispute among scholars and politicians. Contemporary claims and counter-claims on the Eritrean issue are based on differing readings of historical texts, which purport to show either that the territory was traditionally independent of north-central Ethiopia, or the "cradle of Ethiopian civilization," and inextricably linked to Ethiopia.

A similar dispute rages over the origins of what today are the southern provinces of Ethiopia. South of Gojjam and north Shewa, Ethiopia is dominated by the Oromo (the largest ethnic group in the country), with significant representations of a range of other ethnic groups. Advocates of "greater Ethiopia" claim that these areas -- and sometimes territories even further afield in Sudan, Djibouti, Somalia, Kenya and Uganda -- were ruled by Abyssinian Emperors in the middle ages, until the sixteenth-century "invasions" of the Moslems from the east and the Oromo from the south. Others argue that the homelands of the "invaders" fall within the boundaries of modern Ethiopia, and that a reading of history that regards them as extraneous to Ethiopian history gives undue primacy to an Abyssinian version of events. They dispute the territorial extent of the Abyssinian empire, and claim that western historians have been seduced by the allure of the literate Christian legacy of Abyssinia into regarding its people as somehow superior to their non-literate Moslem and pagan neighbors, thereby endorsing the legitimacy of Abyssinian imperial expansion -- and facilitating it through the supply of firearms.

What is certain is that from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century there was no hegemony of a single group over modern-day Ethiopia. At times, independent Amhara kingdoms appeared to be on the point of being vanquished by the Moslems and the Oromo. In the mid-nineteenth century, this began to change, as the northern kingdoms began a process of political centralization, acquisition of European weaponry, and conquest of their southern neighbors -- a process called "unification" by its advocates and "colonization" by its detractors. This reached its climax under Menelik, King of Shewa and Emperor (1889-1913). The Emperor Menelik doubled the size of the empire within a few decades and established the boundaries of modern Ethiopia, and established the supremacy of the Shewan Amhara, not just over the Oromo and other southern groups, but over the Gonder, Gojjam and Wollo Amhara and the Tigray as well.

Ethiopia and the West

To an older generation of people in the west, the name "Ethiopia" is linked to the Italian fascist invasion of 1935; to a younger generation, it is linked to the famine of 1984. There is a common thread to these two momentous events: violations of the humanitarian laws of war.

The Italians invaded Ethiopia, deployed chemical weapons, bombed Red Cross ambulances, and when in control massacred most of the country's educated elite. These abuses, against a fellow member of the League of Nations, scandalized liberal public opinion in Europe and America, and led to widespread sympathy and support for the exiled Emperor Haile Selassie. Ironically, Haile Selassie was later to violate international law in his annexation of Eritrea, and his army was to engage in gross violations of human rights in combatting insurrection in different parts of the empire — but he was still able to play upon the west's conscience and exploit his image as "victim." John Spencer, Haile Selassie's longstanding advisor on international law, with unconscious irony concluded his book *Ethiopia at Bay* with a quotation from Herodotus: "thank the gods that they have not put it into the heart of the sons of the Ethiops to covet countries which do not belong to them."²

Similar but intensified methods of warfare conducted against subjugated peoples in Ethiopia by the Emperor's successor, Colonel (later President) Mengistu Haile Mariam were instrumental in reducing much of the rural population of Ethiopia from a state of poverty and hardship to one of outright famine. International sympathy for Ethiopia's plight led to the greatest outpouring of charitable donation in modern history — a sympathy which again deflected attention from the gross human rights violations in the country.

Ethiopia: Military and State

Army and state in Ethiopia are traditionally so close as to be at times indistinguishable.

The traditional Abyssinian state (or self-proclaimed empire) was founded upon the principles of conquest of neighboring peoples, and the settlement of soldiers on peasant communities. The soldier-settlers were entitled to administer the locality, raise taxes and requisition produce from the farmers. Their chief obligation in return was to be prepared to

² John D. Spencer, *Ethiopia at Bay: A Personal Account of the Haile Selassie Years*, Algonac, Mich., 1984, p. 369.

fight for the king, and to raise a levy of peasants to do the same. One Ethiopian historian has described the system of conquest and rule thus:

All the Christian provinces of the north were originally acquired by wars of conquest ... [The king] appropriated all the people and their land, and reserved the right to dispose of them according to his wishes. He executed all resistance fighters who fell into his hands, and reduced to slavery other captives of war ... These acts of cruel repression were deliberately committed ... to force the people to surrender and to give them a terrible example of the destructive force of the Christian army in case of further revolts.³

The twin themes of brutality in conquest — including the use of exemplary violence to instil fear and subservience — and the military mode of administration, which are here referred to in the context of the 15th century, recur in more recent history.

Traditional Forms of Warfare

There were two basic forms of traditional warfare in Ethiopia. One form was that practiced by centralized states, including the Christian Abyssinian kingdoms located in the northern highlands, and the Moslem sultanates in the east. The second type of warfare was practiced by non-centralized states, including both small-scale societies on the peripheries of Ethiopia, and the large but decentralized confederacy of the Oromo.

Warfare by Centralized States

Abyssinian armies consisted of a group of permanent soldiers attached to the court, and a mass levy in times of emergency. Only the permanent soldiers were trained. The levy method could be remarkably effective in raising huge armies, though for relatively short campaigns. Armies of over 100,000 men were not uncommon in the late 19th century. In 1935, Haile Selassie raised an army of up to 350,000 to fight the Italians.

A central element in traditional warfare in Ethiopia was the unremitting brutality of armies, in wars of conquest, rebellions and counter-insurgency campaigns. "Whose face have you not disfigured?"

³ Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia, 1270-1527*, Oxford, 1972, p. 99.

Whose wife and child have you not captured?" ran a soldier's song from the 14th century.⁴

In the absence of the institutions of civil society, the principal way for the ambitious to advance themselves was through warfare. Banditry was a traditional mode of social mobility: a frustrated local leader would become a bandit (Amharic: *shifita*) for a while, obtaining wealth, a warlike reputation, and a retinue of like-minded followers, until his ruler was compelled to bestow a high office upon him. The most famous example of the successful use of banditry for political advancement was the case of Ras Kassa of Quara, who rose to become the Emperor Teodros, ruling Abyssinia from 1855 to 1868. Some such bandits, such as the Moszagi brothers in Eritrea in the 1940s, have been described as "social bandits,"⁵ but undoubtedly the majority were predators rather than protectors of the poor. The robbery, destruction and general insecurity created by banditry rendered rural people vulnerable to famine.

Counter-insurgency strategies consisted in attempting to buy off the leaders of the rebellion with promises of rank and riches, while wreaking destruction on the rural people in the rebellious area. The inhabitants of an insurgent area within the empire were treated no differently to a newly-conquered "enemy" population. One 19th century European traveller was given an explanation for the scale of destruction: "if an invasion did not completely ruin a country, the inhabitants would sooner or later rebel and it would be necessary to send a great *zemetia* [military expedition] and start all over again."⁶ Examples of this will be given in following chapters. The notion that wanton brutality towards ordinary civilians might make rebel leaders *less* willing to accept a political compromise does not seem to have figured in official military thinking. As a result: "a constant enmity exists between the military and the population in general" so that "country people slay remorselessly any fugitives of either side from the field of battle."⁷

⁴ Quoted in: Richard A. Caulk, "Armies as Predators: Soldiers and Peasants in Ethiopia, c. 1850-1935," *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 11, (1978), p. 460.

⁵ Eric Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, New York, 1981, p. 14.

⁶ Quoted in Bonnie K. Holcombe and Sisai Ibssa, *The Invention of Ethiopia: The Making of a Dependent Colonial State in Northeast Africa*, Trenton, NJ, 1990, p. 108.

⁷ William Plowden, *Travels in Abyssinia*, London, 1868.

Though most of the discussion has referred to the Christian kingdoms, the great Moslem Ethiopian warlord Ahmed al Iman Gran, who led a *jihad* (Islamic holy war) against the highland states in the 16th century, practiced similar forms of warfare, and was renowned for his lack of mercy.

Slaving and Pacification

One of the most common activities of Abyssinian armies was raiding for slaves. Vast areas of the country were depopulated, and entire peoples decimated by slaving raids. Some of those raided included highland peoples such as the Agau; in the last century, as the highland states expanded, the slaving frontier expanded towards the borders of what are now Kenya and Sudan.

The age-old Abyssinian system of settling soldiers on a rural population, which was then required to support them, was dramatically expanded in the late 19th century. This occurred when the state, centered in the highlands of Shewa, expanded to conquer the area known as southern Ethiopia. The conquest of the southern lands, which are mainly Oromo, was achieved by massive military campaigns using firearms provided by European powers. The pacification was achieved through the so-called *neftegna* system. *Neftegna* is Amharic for "rifleman." The Emperor Menelik paid his soldiers with grants of land -- or, more precisely, grants of the services of the indigenous people who were required to till the land. An ordinary soldier was awarded a minimum of two serfs; ranking officers received tens or even hundreds. By these means, Menelik was able to reward his soldiers and also control the newly-conquered southern regions. The serfs, however, were obliged to pay half or more of their produce to their newly-imposed landlords. In times of hardship, this extra burden meant that the serfs descended into famine. The practice of rewarding soldiers and other state servants with grants of occupied land continued until the revolution.

Warfare among Non-Centralized Peoples

Traditional warfare among the Oromo followed a rather different pattern. Traditional Oromo society was organized according to a system of age-grades, known as the *gada* system. The leadership of the community changed every eight years to a new age-set. Each age set was required to engage in a war, involving important ritual elements, known as a *butta* war, before assuming leadership. The *butta* war could be a hunting party directed against wild animals, or a raiding expedition

targeted on a community that had not been raided previously. It was preceded by a huge feast, in which many animals were slaughtered; one of the aims of the war was to replenish livestock by raiding.⁸

Such forms of warfare were central to the traditional Oromo religion. All young men of a certain age grade participated, with women, children and men of other age grades remaining at home.

When confronting the armies of Christian Abyssinia, the Oromo employed a version of guerrilla warfare. Relatively small and highly mobile bands would utilize night raids to weaken and demoralize communities. Obtaining booty was also an important component of the attacks. When the raided communities accepted Oromo domination, and became part of the expanding Oromo political confederacy, the area would become the base for guerrilla-style attacks on the adjoining region.⁹

The Oromo rules of warfare required that when Oromo groups fought among themselves, the level of violence was constrained, and captives should be returned after a peace agreement was reached. When the Oromo attacked non-Oromo groups, the level of brutality was certainly much greater. In general, in contrast to the huge and all-consuming Amhara armies, the smaller and faster-moving Oromo bands would leave less destruction in their wake.

In response to counter-attacks by the larger and better-armed "conventional" Abyssinian armies, the Oromo would simply disperse. The Jesuit Manoel de Almeida noted that the Amhara armies were unable to invade Oromo territory because the Oromo pastoralists did not grow food but instead relied on their cattle, which could be evacuated from the path of an advancing army, which could not therefore feed itself.¹⁰

In the 18th and 19th centuries, some Oromo states grew up in the south-west of Ethiopia, and developed patterns of warfare that were more akin to those of the northern highlands. An Italian missionary described the behavior of these Oromo armies when attacking neighboring, stateless peoples: "When 'foreign' soldiers enter a country, nothing is spared,

⁸ Mohamed Hassen, *The Oromo of Ethiopia: A History 1570-1860*, Cambridge, 1990, p. 12.

⁹ Mohamed Hassen, 1990, pp. 22-4.

¹⁰ M. de Almeida, *Historia de Ethiopia a alta on Abassia*, quoted in R. Pankhurst (ed.) *Travellers in Ethiopia*, London, 1965, pp. 42-3.

families, villages, agriculture, cattle and everything disappears in a few days."¹¹

Marginalized people in southern Ethiopia traditionally practiced forms of warfare akin to mutual raiding for cattle and captives. While both common and violent, a number of factors necessitated a limit to the level of destruction. One such factor was the low level of military technology; a second was the need for a negotiated peace at the end of the conflict, so that both parties could resume basic economic activities such as cattle herding. A third was the ritual element in warfare. The development of trading relations with more powerful states to the north, which demanded slaves and ivory, and the introduction of firearms, upset this system in historical times, so that the last two centuries have witnessed peripheral warfare that has been just as bloody and destructive as that seen in the central highlands, and has at times verged on the genocidal.

Armies and the Creation of Famine

The chronicles of the history of Ethiopia are filled with stories of famines. Richard Pankhurst, a leading historian of Ethiopia, documents that between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries there was on average at least one famine every decade.¹² Prof. Pankhurst joins the majority of scholars who study Ethiopian famine and develops the theme that famine is a natural disaster, caused by drought, pestilence or other kinds of visitation, working upon a society impoverished by thousands of years of isolation and technological stagnation. However, in this history (commissioned by the government of Colonel Mengistu) Prof. Pankhurst makes little mention of the role of warfare, the state's forcible procurement of produce, or the failure of the state to undertake significant actions to prevent or ameliorate famine. This is conveniently close to the official view of the causes of contemporary famines that was propounded by that government.

The Ethiopian state has always been autocratic and unresponsive to the needs of its people. Many of the sources used by historians derive from documents written by officials at court, and so cannot be expected to give an accurate account of the official response to famine. In fact, like some modern publications on famine, their role is to glorify the ruler and present him as pious, generous and enlightened.

¹¹ G. Massaja, quoted in Mohamed Hassan, 1990, p. 127.

¹² Richard Pankhurst, *The History of Famine and Epidemics in Ethiopia Prior to the Twentieth Century*, Addis Ababa, RRC, 1985.

Prof. Pankhurst disparages "the long-established Ethiopian tradition of blaming natural calamities on the wickedness of the people."¹³ Both historical and contemporary evidence suggests that the opposite is more often true: famines brought about by the callous actions of powerful people are commonly blamed on nature — especially by court chroniclers.

Requisitioning Food

The historical sources, despite their limitations, tell a story of centuries of state-created famine in Ethiopia.¹⁴ The manner in which wars were conducted was instrumental in creating famine. One way in which this occurred was the requisitioning of food by armies, which provisioned themselves from the local inhabitants. The Portuguese Jesuit B. Tellez visited Ethiopia in the 17th century, and wrote that famine was common on account of visitations of locusts and "the marchings of the soldiers ... which is a plague worse than the locusts, because they [the locusts] devour only what they find in the fields, whereas the other [the soldiers] spare not what is laid up in houses."¹⁵ Armies on campaign were described as leaving almost as much ruin and devastation as if the country had been invaded by the enemy. The mass armies raised for discrete campaigns were huge, even by modern standards. Noting that "an Abyssinian army often numbers 80,000 men, accompanied by 30,000 women, slaves and camp followers," the Englishman Colonel Berkeley wrote: "it will be understood that it leaves a desert wherever it goes."¹⁶ He was writing from experience in the 1860s — even larger armies were fielded in the following decades. Even the staff of the Ethiopian Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC), reviewing the historical evidence

¹³ Pankhurst, 1985, p. 46.

¹⁴ Many of these sources were utilized by Prof. Pankhurst in earlier publications written under the auspices of independent academic institutions.

¹⁵ B. Tellez, quoted in Margery Perham, *The Government of Ethiopia*, London, 1969, p. 163.

¹⁶ Quoted in *Horn of Africa*, 4.1, 1981, p. 29.

for famines, were obliged to conclude that many famines were caused directly by armies' food requirements.¹⁷

In the 19th century, Emperors Teodros and Menelik both tried to introduce strategic grain stores for the specific purpose of feeding the army, but in neither instance was this consistently implemented and it is also unclear how the grain was obtained. Haile Selassie was the first ruler to introduce a standing army under unified central control, and to undertake systematic measures in order to provide for it.

Access to food supplies was therefore central to military strategy. This has already been noted with regard to Amhara-Oromo warfare. Lack of food to feed armies played a critical role in the Tigray rebellion of 1913/14. Local Tigrayan nobles wrote to Ras Wolde Giorgis, head of the Shewan army, imploring him not to invade Tigray to put down the revolt, because a crop failure meant that the province could not support two armies. When Wolde Giorgis did invade, many of his soldiers deserted on account of lack of food.¹⁸

War against the Economic Base

A second manner in which warfare contributed to famine was the economic nature of many wars. Wars between Abyssinian principalities were in part designed to remove the power of the adversary to raise an army -- with the implication that the destruction of grain stores and other essential items in the economy was a military objective. Thus the Emperor Yohannes deliberately despoiled Gojjam in the 1880s so that King Teklehaimanot could not support his soldiers -- instead the King invaded the independent principality of Keffa and quartered his army there.¹⁹ Wars of conquest, fought mainly against people in southern Ethiopia, were designed to subjugate the people so that they could be brought under Amhara domination. Most of these people were Oromo, and many were pastoralists. The empire required a class of serfs, tied to the land. This was clearly impractical if the subject populations had their own independent source of livelihood. Other reasons for confiscating cattle and crops and destroying villages were desire to break the spirit of resistance, the need to obtain food for the army, and the tradition of

¹⁷ RRC, "Food Shortage Report on Tigray, Annex: A Historical Perspective on Famine in Tigray," Addis Ababa, 1979, p. 39.

¹⁸ National Records Office, Khartoum, File Intel 2/19/160.

¹⁹ Perham, 1969, p. 161.

wanton brutality. These coincided with a strategic politico-economic imperative of destroying the independent source of sustenance of conquered people.

Another aspect of the relationship between armies and famine is also worthy of note. One is that armies were carriers of disease, and themselves disease-ridden. Many more soldiers died from illnesses contracted on campaign than from the wounds of battle. In Menelik's campaign against Gojjam in 1882, 3,000 soldiers were killed by disease, as against 900 in battle (plus 50 killed by peasants while looting).²⁰ Local populations would flee before approaching armies for fear of contracting diseases. In 1913/14, for example, the Shewan army was responsible for introducing a cholera epidemic to Tigray, at that time on the verge of famine.

The Great Famine of 1888-92

The great famine of 1888-92, popularly known as *Kifu Qen*, ("Evil Days") was possibly the worst famine in Ethiopia's recorded history, and some estimate that as much as one third of the population died. A rinderpest epidemic decimated cattle herds, while a combination of drought, locusts and army worms damaged crops. The actions of the state, however, were also important in deepening the famine for many sections of Ethiopian society, while helping others to survive and even benefit.

The famine struck at a time when the Emperor Yohannes was fighting the armies of the Sudanese Mahdi, and when King (after 1889, Emperor) Menelik was waging large campaigns of destruction in the south. Menelik was able to procure grain to help feed his new capital at Addis Ababa, so that it was described as a "Noah's Ark" amid general devastation. It appears that much of this was obtained by the confiscation of "concealed" grain in the rural areas.²¹ A common traditional storage method uses underground pits -- the grain stored there is not a hoarded surplus, but the family's diet. Sources do not reveal whether this was the origin of Menelik's famine relief for Addis Ababa, but it is probable that rural people suffered so that townspeople could eat. Magazines were set up to feed the army -- by levying a new tithe on the peasantry, which contemporary chroniclers optimistically recorded as "popular." The

²⁰ Caulk, 1978, pp. 476-7.

²¹ Pankhurst, 1985, p. 101.

Emperor also made some symbolic gestures such as no longer eating meat at his court, and going to a field to dig with a hoe.

However, Menelik's chief response to the famine was to try to export it by invading his southern neighbors. Amhara lords reacted to the famine by plundering the rich Oromo province of Arsi (three different governors participated) and raiding cattle in the Ogaden. Menelik authorized the sending of northern garrisons to southern towns such as Bure and Nekempte to be fed by the local population -- presumably without the latter's consent.²² The Gojjami army occupied Keffa to feed itself there, and thousands of Shewans migrated to the highlands of Harerghe.

Yet, if official sources are to be believed, "the reaction of the Emperor Menelik to the emergency was one of the few bright spots in an otherwise gloomy picture."²³ The despot was, we are told, "very distressed to see his army famished"²⁴ and ordered provincial governors to supply famine relief to the troops -- the sources of supply of this generous relief are not mentioned. Parallels with the late twentieth century need not be stressed.

An Outline of Vulnerability to Famine in Ethiopia

This section consists in a discussion of the socio-economy of rural Ethiopia, with a focus upon Tigray and the adjoining areas. This analysis is important because it provides the framework in which the governmental actions of the 1980s can be appreciated. The government's counter-insurgency methods tore at the very sinews which kept the rural economy together, turning a period of hardship into one of outright famine. Some of those sinews are obvious, such as peasant farming, some of them are less obvious. It is necessary to analyze how they held the economy together in normal times.

The most common view of the socio-economy of Ethiopia centers on the relationship between the soil, the peasant and those who tax the peasant. The focus is upon the agricultural system. In the central and

²² Richard Pankhurst and Douglas Johnson, "The Great Drought and Famine of 1888-92 in Northeast Africa," in D. Johnson and D. Anderson (eds.) *The Ecology of Survival: Case Studies From Northeast African History*, London, 1988, pp. 56-7.

²³ Pankhurst, 1985, p. 98.

²⁴ Pankhurst, 1985, p. 101.

northern highlands, farmers grow a variety of crops in the spring (*belg*) and summer (*meher*) growing seasons (Eritrea and much of Tigray receive only the *meher* rains). Ox-plows are used to prepare the land, using technology that has changed little over millennia. Ethiopia is one of the original loci of cereal cultigens, and there is a huge variety of strains of each of the major crops: *teff* (the most prestigious staple), wheat, barley, millet, sorghum and maize.

While agriculture is central to the Ethiopian economy, the view that focusses upon it to the exclusion of other aspects of rural life can be misleading. James McCann, a leading authority on the northern highlands, considers that "the image of the insular, long-suffering Ethiopian peasant" and the view that sees "highland farmers and highland agriculture as static and self-contained ... [have] obstructed understanding of the rural economy and social history of northern Ethiopia."²⁵ Ethiopian highland peasants do not survive just by growing things in the fields -- migration, trade and animal rearing are important too.

Rather than conceptualizing rural Ethiopia as an agglomeration of independent peasants each provisioning himself or herself from farming, it is more useful to see the region as a pattern of geographically-specialized areas, with a set of links between them. This is particularly the case for the north.

The fundamental dichotomy is between areas which are normally surplus-producing, and areas which are regularly in food deficit. In the north, the surplus areas include: Gojjam province, southwestern Wollo, central Gonder and Simien, Raya district in eastern Tigray and Shire district in western Tigray. These areas are not particularly drought-prone; even when drought hits other parts of the country, they normally continue to produce adequate crops or surpluses. When these areas do suffer a partial crop failure, it is usually localized and may be due to hailstorms, frost, infestations of pests such as locusts or army-worms, or indeed too much rain.

The food deficit areas include most of the rest of northern Ethiopia, especially some parts of eastern Gonder, northern and eastern Wollo, most of Tigray, and almost all of Eritrea. They form an arc along the eastern escarpment of the highlands, with an extension into the Tembien-Wag area, where there is a rain shadow on account of the Simien mountains. Many of these areas have been in chronic deficit for a hundred years (since the great famine of 1888-92). They produce a good

²⁵ James McCann, *From Poverty to Famine in Northeast Ethiopia: A Rural History 1900-1935*, Philadelphia, 1987, p. 69.

harvest perhaps once or twice a decade, and a run of six or seven years of crop failure is not unusual.

While adequate rains and the absence of pests are important to production in all areas, for many farmers the critical factor causing them to fail to grow adequate crops is lack of oxen to plow the land. The more times a field is plowed, the higher the yield. Investigations have shown that in poorer areas of northern Ethiopia, approximately one third of the farmers have one ox, and one third have none — only one third have two or more. A farmer with one ox is traditionally known as "half a man". He must team up with a neighbor in order to put together a plow team, which then divides its time between the farms. A farmer with no ox must try to hire a plow team, and can usually only afford to make one or two passes with the plow, instead of an optimal higher number. The single most important short-term constraint on higher food production is shortage of plow oxen.

Oxen are expensive. Farmers must save in order to buy one, and the loss of an ox is a devastating blow to a poor household.

Treated as a whole, northern Ethiopia is very rarely in overall food deficit. Conceding that statistics are very unreliable, perhaps the only year in recent times when there was such a deficit was 1984. In all other years between 1975 and 1991 there has been a net surplus, though sometimes a small one. The problem is not food availability, it is food distribution.

This leads to the question: how do the people who live in the deficit areas make good that deficit? The answer is, through four basic means:

- * Working for money. Large numbers of rural Ethiopians undertake paid labor, either close to home, or migrating to surplus-producing or coffee-producing areas, cities, or farming schemes. Migrant laborers buy food where it is cheaper and more plentiful than in their home areas, in effect redistributing it from surplus to deficit areas.
- * Engaging in petty trade. In the seasons when agriculture is not possible, many men engage in trading, using donkeys and mules. One researcher in the village of Adiet, near Axum in Tigray, found that more than half of the adult men in the village were part-time traders, in salt, grain, animals and consumer goods. Some travelled as far afield as Gojjam to buy grain.²⁶ For the pastoralists of the lowlands,

²⁶ Richard Baker, interviewed by Alex de Waal, November 1990.

trade is even more important. By these means, food is moved from surplus to deficit areas.

- * Selling animals. Not only the specialist pastoralists of the lowlands, but many highland farmers, earn a considerable income from selling animals. Animals are kept for sale and for milk. One of the few investigations of the role of animals in the highlands was done by Noel Cossins and Bekele Yemeron in the 1970s.²⁷ They concluded that in many areas, animals played a role at least as important as farming. One of these areas was the Tembien-Wag area in Tigray-Wollo, which was the epicenter of the famine of 1983-5. In the Eritrean highlands this is also the case, and many farmers are in fact semi-nomadic, migrating with their animals out of the highlands to the eastern and western escarpments.
- * Remittances from relatives working in towns and abroad are important, particularly in Eritrea, which has larger cities, more industry, and more ready access to neighboring countries.

Other strategies, such as eating wild foods and borrowing, are also commonly followed. Another strategy followed is going hungry: rural people will reduce consumption in order to preserve essential assets such as seed, farm tools and plough oxen. The meager diet upon which Ethiopian peasants are able to survive appears to contradict the basic tenets of nutritional science, but is remarked upon by all who have studied famine survival strategies.

A Digression into Statistics

There are no reliable statistics for Ethiopia, especially the northern regions. This is for three main reasons: (1) there have been no systematic investigations of most aspects of the rural economy of the north, in part because of prolonged warfare in the area, (2) even the most basic facts are subject to political manipulation, and (3) peasants are reluctant to divulge information to outsiders.

Information is power. The Imperial government withheld information about famines, and news about the famines in the post-revolutionary period was subject to both censorship and distortion. Similar

²⁷ Noel J. Cossins and Bekele Yemeron, "Still Sleep the Highlands: A Study of Farm and Livestock Systems in the Central Highlands of Ethiopia," Addis Ababa, Livestock and Meat Board, 1973.

considerations apply to basic facts about rural production, rainfall, and the human population.

For many years, even rainfall data were regarded as a state secret (the logic behind this will become evident in this report). In addition, due to the war, many rainfall monitoring stations ceased to function.

The size of the human population is not known for sure to within several millions. In part this is due to problems with counting people. Some peasants remain totally unreached, hiding in the mountains: "since the state provides very little that is beneficial to the peasant but siphons off a good deal of the latter's harvest, a large number of these mountain peasants will soon be driven to break their ties with the outside world, and to retreat to their rugged fortresses to live a life of independence in sublime isolation."²⁸ When the first national census was conducted in 1984, the enumerators found 29 per cent more people than expected in the areas in which they were able to survey -- suddenly, an extra eight million Ethiopians were "discovered."

The most contentious population issue in northern Ethiopia is the question of the number of people in Tigray. This was an issue of dispute throughout the 1980s. On one side, the government claimed that Tigray contained between two and 2.8 million people. On the other, the TPLF claimed that figures collected from village committees indicated a population of between 4.5 and 5 million. In 1989/90 the population estimates were 2.73 million (government) and 4.82 million (TPLF) respectively. This issue became important in 1985 when the government claimed that most of the famine victims in Tigray were receiving rations -- a claim that could only be made if the government's 1984 population figure of 2.41 million was accepted.

Demographic data from Ethiopia are extremely poor. Nobody knows how many people there really are in Tigray. However, the evidence that is available does allow a set of preliminary estimates to be made. These show, that while the population may not be as high as claimed by the TPLF, it is undoubtedly much higher than that claimed by the Mengistu government. There are several elements to the revision of the population estimate.

- 1 TPLF-defined Tigray includes parts of Raya Kobo, Tselemti, and Wolkait, which are in government-defined Wollo and Gonder. According to the TPLF in 1989, these extra areas contained

²⁸ Dessalegn Rahmato, "Famine and Survival Strategies, A Case Study from Northeast Ethiopia," Addis Ababa, Institute for Development Research, 1987, p. 51.

400,000 people. The following discussion will be confined to the smaller government-defined Tigray.

- II Tigray was not enumerated in the 1984 census, because of the war. The population estimate given by the government was therefore derived from the 1969 National Sample Survey, which estimated a population of 1.56 million, with 2.7 per cent per annum added on for population growth. However, the results of the 1969 survey were suspect. The figure first announced was 1.36 million, down from the estimate based on the 1965 sample survey, of 1.41 million; in January 1970 it was revised upwards. A more detailed survey in the early 1970s estimated the population at 2.04 million, but internal evidence in the survey results indicate that is likely to have been an underestimate.²⁹

A major source of inaccuracy for the figures for Tigray was the large number of temporary outmigrants from the province, probably more than ten per cent of the total population. After the revolution, most of this temporary outmigration ceased, boosting the local population accordingly. Thus it is likely that in 1969 the real population was at least 2.2 million.³⁰ This would imply a 1989 population of 3.65 million.

- III In the areas where enumeration was possible, the 1984 census found an additional 29 per cent of people compared to estimates derived from the 1969 survey.³¹ It is safe to assume that, had enumerators actually visited Tigray, they would have found an

²⁹ Hunting Technical Services, "Tigrai Rural Development Study, Annex 3: Population," Borehamwood, 1975. The survey found a relative shortage of young girls.

³⁰ It is notable that the 1970 language survey found 3.56 million Tigrinya speakers, about 400,000 more than could be accounted for in the total estimates for the settled Tigrinya-speaking populations of highland Eritrea, Tigray and its borderlands, Addis Ababa and elsewhere.

³¹ The census was conducted shortly after the government began a program of systematic conscription of young males into the army. The data show a relative shortage of young males -- presumably concealed from the census enumerators by themselves and their families.

additional number of people. An additional 29 per cent on the official figure would imply a 1989 population of 3.62 million.

- IV The results of the 1969 survey were manipulated for political reasons. The most well-known example of that was the underestimation of the number of Oromo. Though the Oromo actually outnumbered the Amhara, this politically-sensitive fact was suppressed, and the results claimed that 7.8 million Amhara outnumbered 6.8 million Oromo. There were also allegations (never systematically investigated) that the total population of Tigray was also reduced for political reasons, and that the district-by-district totals added up to much more. As this possible distortion cannot be proved or quantified, it will not be considered.

Factors II and III should be combined. Even if the corrected results of the 1969 survey had been known, the 1984 census would still have found more. Combining factors II and III results in a total 1989 population estimate of 4.70 million. A more conservative estimate would assume that factor III operated at "half strength", which would imply a total 1989 population of 4.20 million (for government-defined Tigray) and 4.60 million (for "greater" Tigray).

This shows that in 1989/90 the government of Ethiopia underestimated the population of Tigray by at least 1.4 million people (i.e. one third).

Figures for rural production are highly suspect. Most estimates for areas of farmland derive from tax records, which are arrived at by processes of negotiation, influence and bribery. One scholar studying land before the revolution noted that only two per cent of the farmland in Tigray had ever been measured, which was better than Gojjam (0.1 per cent) and Gonder (none at all). He concluded: "on two fronts, ownership and boundaries, these farmers have succeeded in preventing the government from learning the substantive details that would allow any forceful application of the land taxes."³² As a result, accurate knowledge of farmed area was non-existent. After the revolution, as the Agricultural Marketing Corporation (AMC) gradually extended its procurement in the late 1970s, sample surveys were begun in selected villages to assess the crops. In Wollo, the assessments of cropped area and harvest, which had been approximately stable up to 1978/9, suddenly more than doubled in 1979/80, remaining at comparable levels thereafter.

³² Peter Schwab, *Decision-Making in Ethiopia: A Study of the Political Process*, London, 1972, pp. 30-1.

It is likely that pressure to identify surpluses available for procurement by the AMC influenced the sudden increase in harvest estimate. In 1981, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO) gave technical assistance to the Ministry of Agriculture, enabling it to double the number of surveys. The result was a huge increase in the estimated yield. Overruling objections from the statisticians who wanted to double-check the figures, the central government published the unchecked first estimate -- because the high figure could be used to demonstrate the claimed "success" of the government's newly-launched campaign to increase agricultural production.

Figures for amounts of grain in storage or numbers of domestic animals are even more unreliable -- the information must be obtained by asking peasants, who are reluctant to divulge anything to an outsider who is likely to be seen as wanting to assess taxes, recruit soldiers, confiscate land, or otherwise interfere with the peasant's autonomy. Official statistics are thus politically loaded facts based on varying degrees of ignorance about the reality.

Figures for those "in need" on account of famine are similarly suspect. Figures from the government Relief and Rehabilitation Commission were based on village reports (in government-held areas) and gross estimates elsewhere. In 1983, the total for Tigray was exactly one million; for Wollo, it was given down to the last individual. Examples of political manipulation of the figures will occur in this report. Figures produced by the FAO are based upon satellite imagery of vegetative growth and ground surveys. Satellite imagery of vegetation is useful for assessing the extent of drought, but cannot evaluate the impact of war, trade disruptions, taxation or pests, limiting its value for Ethiopia in the 1980s. In addition, throughout the 1980s, UN teams could not travel to rural areas of Eritrea, Tigray and north Wollo to conduct ground checks.

Ethiopian peasants are notoriously unwilling to divulge even the most basic information to outsiders. This stems from the well-founded fear that information is liable to be used against them. One of the peasants' few weapons against excessive exactions by the government is the latter's ignorance about their real condition, including how many of them there are. Several rural revolts (notably in Gojjam) have been sparked by government attempts to measure farm land. Peasants prefer the "sublime isolation" alluded to above.

The Ethiopian peasantry cannot be counted against its will. Hitherto, that will has almost always been lacking. Only with the advent of famine relief and more democratic forms of government are reliable statistics about the number of Ethiopians and their condition likely to be produced.

One tendency is certain: the closer an investigator probes into the rural economy of northern Ethiopia, the more he or she finds -- whether it be people, farmland, animals, or any other form of resources. One fact is equally certain: any attempt to quantify any aspect of Ethiopian society is a hazardous enterprise; and those who put figures on their claims for things such as rural production, the extent of environmental degradation, or the numbers dead in a famine, are speaking either in ignorance of the truth, or with the intention of concealing it.

2. SCORCHED EARTH IN ERITREA, 1961-77

Background to the Conflict in Eritrea

The political background to the war in Eritrea has been studied many times by scholars of different leanings. Before conquest by Italian forces in the late 1880s, the history of Eritrea is controversial -- scholars dispute whether significant areas of it were tributary to states in Ethiopia proper, or not.

For half a century Eritrea was an Italian colony, until occupation by the British army during the Second World War. There then followed a decade of political turmoil, as the post-war powers dithered about the future of the territory, and the Eritreans organized themselves into a welter of political parties which campaigned for nationalist, sectarian or unionist causes using fair means and foul. For the most part, the highland Christian population was sympathetic to union with Ethiopia, whereas the lowland Moslem population wanted independence. Some of the lowland peoples, notably the Beni Amer tribe which straddles the Sudanese border, were influenced by the growing nationalist movement in British-controlled Sudan. After several false starts in trying to determine Eritrea's future, the Allied powers turned the issue over to the United Nations, which appointed a Commission of Inquiry to investigate the wishes of the Eritrean people.

When the UN Commission of Inquiry made its investigation, there was widespread rural unrest, which made it impossible to visit many lowland areas in western Eritrea. The investigation was also cursory in the extreme, and no referendum was held. Meanwhile, an Eritrean assembly was elected, by indirect voting, and was approximately evenly-divided on the crucial issue of independence or unity with Ethiopia. The Ethiopian "liaison office" headed by Colonel Negga Haile Selassie financed the pro-Ethiopian Unionist Party, mobilized the Orthodox church on his side, and intimidated the opposition. These tactics served to alienate much of Eritrea's elite.

Finally, US strategic interests proved the decisive factor. The US was a close ally of Haile Selassie, and wanted the use of the strategically-sited air force and communications base at Kagnew, in Asmara. In 1952, Eritrea was given a constitution which included a democratically-elected assembly and the key institutions of civil society, but federated *under* the Ethiopian crown.

Haile Selassie reportedly neither understood nor approved of the notion of federation,¹ and at once set to work annexing the territory. The Eritrean administration was stripped of its powers and the Assembly was undermined. The Emperor dismissed and appointed Eritrean ministers. A strike by the Eritrean labor unions in 1958 was met with violence — over 200 strikers were detained and 60 injured by soldiers. Finally, in 1962, coerced and bribed, and with the building surrounded by soldiers, the Assembly members voted to dissolve the Federation.

Throughout the 1940s there had been widespread *shifita* activity in the lowlands, with up to 3,000 bandits active. This abated after the British offered an amnesty in 1947, but by the mid 1950s many former *shifita* returned to violence. When Haile Selassie's intentions were clear but the act of annexation not yet consummated, leading pro-independence Eritreans fled into exile and formed the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) in 1961. They made contact with *shifita* leaders, and armed revolt began in September of that year. Most of the membership of the ELF was Moslem, from the western lowlands, and in particular from the Beni Amer.

The government deepened Eritrean opposition by continuing to dismantle Eritrean institutions and deprive Eritreans of basic civil and political rights. There were also a number of political detentions and trials, including one of 19 government officials accused of supporting the ELF, which was transferred to Addis Ababa in 1963 because the government believed that no convictions would be obtained in an Eritrean court. Even those Eritreans who had previously been ardent supporters of the Union became disillusioned. For example, Tedla Bairu, the first Eritrean prime minister, defected to the ELF.

Eritrean Resistance 1961–74

The first shots in the Eritrean war were fired on September 1, 1961 in the lowland district of Barka. The leader of the ELF detachment that engaged the Ethiopian soldiers was a well-known ex-*shifita* called Idris Awate. Most of his band of eleven followers had previous military experience in the Sudan Defence Force.² Over the following few years the political and military leaders operated largely in mutual isolation. Idris Awate was killed in 1962, but the ELF continued to grow on the ground, and in the mid 1960s it had over 2,000 fighters.

¹ John D. Spencer, *Ethiopia at Bay: A Personal Account of the Haile Selassie Years*, Algonai, Mich., 1984.

² The British-run colonial army of Sudan.

Prominent political leaders of the ELF included Woldeab Woldemariam, Osman Saleh Sabbe and Idris Mohamed Adam. In 1963 a ten-member Supreme Council was established in Khartoum. Finance, armaments and training came at different times from most Arab countries, including Syria and Iraq -- under whose Baathist ideology Eritrea was incorporated into the Arab world. In the late 1960s, the ELF received assistance from Cuba and other Marxist states.

Sudanese support was important but not unwavering. While public opinion in Khartoum and Kassala was strongly pro-ELF, successive Sudanese governments followed vacillating policies: support during 1961-4; increasing coolness during 1965 (13 ELF fighters were extradited to Ethiopia that year and some were subsequently executed); and coldness from 1967-9, during which time ELF political activity was prohibited. During the early radical phase of Colonel Jaafar Nimeiri's rule (May 1969-July 1971), Sudanese support for the ELF was again strong; it was then cut off in response to an Ethiopian withdrawal of support for the Anyanya rebels in southern Sudan. Relations between Sudan and Ethiopia then deteriorated after the 1974 revolution, reaching a nadir when the Ethiopian government backed an attempted coup in Sudan in July 1976. In response, the Sudanese government followed policies strongly supportive of Eritrean independence -- for two years. The most important role played by the Sudan government was allowing the Eritrean fronts to transit supplies, including military equipment, through Port Sudan.

In 1965, the ELF reorganized itself into five operational zones along the lines of the Algerian Front de Liberation National.

The ELF was an amalgam of different elements -- indeed, the zonal structure of 1965 was adopted partly in order to prevent conflict between different regionally-based elements within the organization. Many substantial conflicts within the organization were left unaddressed. In the early years, the membership was almost entirely Moslem, and the organization had a strong tinge of pan-Arabism. A position often adopted was that the liberation of Eritrea should precede social or economic transformation. In the late 1960s there was a growing radical element within the ELF, leading to the adoption of Marxist ideas.

Much of the insurgent activity in the 1960s and early 1970s involved acts of sabotage against government installations and bridges, and ambushes of convoys and trains. The ELF also regularly engaged army patrols, and attacked small garrisons and police posts. It quickly made most of the lowland countryside impassable to government forces except in military convoys.

The ELF was anxious to avoid the mistakes of the Palestine Liberation Organization, and was reluctant to let people evacuate to Sudan in large

numbers. ELF leaders recognized that life in refugee camps would breed a generation of young people bitter and addicted to violence, and argued that this would undercut the revolutionary idealism necessary for their membership.

The first of a series of splits in the ELF occurred in 1968. Osman Saleh Sabbe, a prominent exiled leader, departed and founded his own organization. Ibrahim Tewolde (later poisoned in suspicious circumstances) and Isseyas Afeworki founded the Tripartite Union. This led eventually to the formation of the EPLF in February 1972, led by Isseyas and Ramadan Nur. The ELF, under the military command of Abdalla Idris, denounced the new organization.

There then followed two years of internecine strife between the two movements, which caused an estimated 3,000 casualties among the fighters -- more deaths among the combatants than the entire thirteen years of government military actions to date. Purges within the two fronts also saw a number of people murdered. A battle between the two fronts at Wolki in October 1974 left 600 fighters dead, and caused a spontaneous demonstration by the citizens of Asmara, who marched to the battlefield and demanded that the fronts settle their differences by negotiation.

Counter-Insurgency 1961-74

Idris Awate's personal history as a *shifita* leader, the background of the other guerrillas, plus twenty years recent experience of intermittent banditry in western and southern Eritrea, enabled the government to regard the threat as one of straightforward brigandage utilized for personal advancement by Moslem sectarians.

Throughout the 1960s, the counter-insurgency strategy followed consisted of punitive patrols, interspersed with large offensives and a policy of forced relocation in fortified villages. This was a colonial-type technique designed to impress the subjugated population with the firepower and determination of the government. It led directly to large-scale human rights abuses.

The actions of the army also led to the impoverishment of rural people, food shortages, and famine. The soldiers requisitioned food, destroyed crops, killed animals, prevented trade, drove people from their land, and (during 1975) blockaded the entire highlands. From the very start of the war, the Ethiopian army used hunger as a weapon.

Starting in September 1961, the day-to-day brutality of army patrols caused many abuses of human rights. Dawit Wolde Giorgis, later head of the RRC, served as a military officer at the time. While fervently pro-

unity (i.e. anti-Eritrean independence), he was critical of the army's operational methods:

The army ... entered Eritrea in the 1960s with the mentality of a conqueror. It belittled the small bands of Moslem separatists operating in the lowland areas and believed it could command respect and loyalty from the people by sheer show of force.... The army made a crucial error in this operation; it did not concentrate on attacking the guerrillas directly; instead it devastated the villages suspected of harboring them.

Another disastrous decision was that the army would carry only two or three days' rations at a time. After they ran out, they were expected to live off the land, to take what they needed from the people. I remember soldiers slaughtering cattle, eating what they wanted, and then leaving the rest to rot. Sometimes soldiers would kill cattle just to get the livers. It was as if they were in enemy territory.³

Haggai Erlich, an Israeli scholar, commented that "usually in Eritrea a company would leave for a month-long routine counter-insurgency operation carrying almost no supplies, which almost inevitably turned them into *shifra* in uniform."⁴

A more effective aspect of the Ethiopian counter-insurgency operation was the training of an elite commando force, with Israeli assistance. Known as Force 101, this unit became operational in 1965.

Scorched Earth: The 1967 Killings

The first large-scale abuses of human rights occurred during three army offensives in 1967. The governor of Eritrea, Ras Asrate Kassa is reported to have boasted that he would leave Eritrea as bare as his bald head. Certainly, throughout the year the army behaved as though the depopulation of the Eritrean countryside was its aim.

The first offensive began at dawn on February 11, when a force of about 5,000 soldiers began burning villages in Barka district. An Israeli advisor wrote in his diary:

³ Dawit Wolde Giorgis, *Red Tears: War, Famine and Revolution in Ethiopia*, Trenton, NJ, 1989, p. 82.

⁴ Haggai Erlich, *The Struggle over Eritrea 1962-1978: War and Revolution in the Horn of Africa*, Stanford, 1983, p. 39.

The Second Division is very efficient in killing innocent people. They are alienating the Eritreans and deepening the hatred that already exists. Their commander took his aides to a spot near the Sudanese border and ordered them: "from here to the north -- clear the area." Many innocent people were massacred and nothing of substance was achieved.⁵

Between February and April the army burned 62 villages, including Mogoraib, Zamla, Ad Ibrahim, Gerset Gurgur, Adi Bera, Asir, Fori and Ad Habab, while villagers were ordered to collect at army posts for screening. The soldiers were assisted by artillery and aerial bombardment using incendiaries. According to reports from local community leaders, 402 civilians were killed, and about 60,000 cattle and camels slaughtered with machine guns and knives and by burning alive.⁶ In addition, 21 detainees, most of them teachers and government employees, were summarily executed in Tessenei prison on February 12. Traders were singled out for detention or killing, because they were believed to be responsible for supplying food to the insurgents.

Between March and May, 25,500 Eritrean refugees were registered in Sudan, and an estimated 5,000 more crossed the border and stayed unregistered in Beni Amer villages. The Ethiopian government objected to humanitarian assistance, calling them "rebels not refugees."⁷ On March 15, the Sudanese village of Guba, close to the border, was attacked by the Ethiopian army on the suspicion that ELF fighters were present. One villager was shot dead and three were kidnapped. A nearby village, Debre Sultan, was also attacked. Immediately before the offensive began, Haile Selassie had visited Sudan to ensure that the Sudanese government would respond appropriately: it duly withdrew the refugees from the border area and prohibited the activities of the ELF, but succeeded in obtaining humanitarian assistance from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and setting up a refugee camp.⁸ This was UNHCR's

⁵ Quoted in: Erlich, 1983, p. 58.

⁶ Mohamed Hamed, *The International Dimension of the Battle for Eritrea*, Beirut, 1974, pp. 126-7 (in Arabic).

⁷ Ahmad Karadawi, "Refugee Policy in the Sudan 1967-1984," DPhil Thesis, Oxford, 1988, pp. 57-9.

⁸ Karadawi, 1988, pp. 62-4.

first involvement in the Horn of Africa, and the first of many refugee flows over the following 25 years.

After these atrocities, a large area of Barka was left uninhabited.

In July 1967, the army turned its attention to the eastern lowlands of Semhar. The villages of Eilet and Gumhot were burned on July 11, and 30 young men were tied up and burned alive inside a house. Five other villages were burned over the following days,⁹ and 51 people killed. 6,000 domestic animals were killed; according to reports, the soldiers singled out camels for slaughter, because they were vital for transport.¹⁰

The third offensive started in November 1967. 7,000 soldiers from the Second Division began to burn villages in the vicinity of Keren. Almost all the villages of Senhit -- 174 in all -- were destroyed. Some reliably reported atrocities included:

- * Kuhul and Amadi: the army ordered the people to collect in one place, where they were bombed by air force planes.
- * Asmat: the army opened fire on a wedding party, killing an unknown number.
- * Melefso: thirty community leaders who met the soldiers and offered them hospitality were killed.

The army burned crops, killed or confiscated livestock and poisoned wells, with the clear intention of making the area uninhabitable.

After Senhit, the burning of villages spread to the highland districts of Seraye and Akele Guzai, which had been hitherto little affected by the war. 86 villages were burned in these two districts, and at least 159 people killed.

Forced Relocation in Fortified Villages

In December 1966, the army began a policy of forcible relocation into fortified villages among the pastoral population of Barka. After each of the three 1967 offensives much of the population was relocated in new villages or forced to live in nearby towns.

⁹ One of those destroyed was Sheib, the scene of massacres in 1988 and 1989 (see chapter 14).

¹⁰ Mohamed, 1974, p. 131.

In the fortified villages, curfews were imposed, together with restrictions on daytime movements. This had a profound impact on the livelihood of the herders. In normal times, pastoralists leave their village for days or weeks during the dry season in order to search for grazing; if they are confined to a radius of half a day's walk from the village, they can only keep a small number of animals on the limited grass and browse of this area. In addition, because of the daytime heat during certain times of year, herders prefer to graze and water animals at night. This is better for the animals' health and means they drink less water -- water is a scarce and expensive commodity in Eritrea. The policy of curfews made this night-time grazing impossible. On occasions when the strategic hamlets proved too difficult to maintain, the army forcibly relocated the population in nearby urban centers, with even more drastic consequences for their livelihoods. Strict controls on trade were established, with the inspection of all food items brought in and out of villages and towns by vehicle or pack animal.

However, as the ELF regained control of the countryside, the people began to return to their previous homes.

The 1970-1 Massacres

In January 1970, the army re-launched the policy of forcible villagization, coinciding with a large military sweep through Barka and Sahel. Tens of villages were burned. In March, 16,700 refugees fled to Sudan, mostly to the Tokar area along the Red Sea coast. The period from April to July witnessed many atrocities as military activities spread to the eastern lowlands. 32 civilians were shot dead when the army burned Arafali village. 88 people were executed when the people of Atshoma, between Massawa and Ghinda, refused army orders to relocate in a protected village.

Violence against the civilian population increased towards the end of the year. In retaliation for an ambush in which a senior army commander was killed, there was a series of massacres near Keren. One atrocity was the killing of 112 people in a mosque at Basadare in November. The people were collected in the mosque by soldiers who said they would be safe there from a planned air strike; the soldiers then opened fire. Another was the destruction of the village of Ona on December 1, in which an estimated 625 people were killed. This was apparently in retaliation for the villagers betraying the presence of an army patrol to the ELF, which

ambushed it and killed several soldiers.¹¹ Acting contrary to official orders, local boy scouts re-entered the village to bury the dead.

In December, the military governor imposed a state of emergency on Eritrea, and assumed powers of arbitrary arrest, and the right to displace the population. Ten-kilometer strips of land along the coast and the Sudan border were declared "prohibited zones," where the army could open fire on any target. On January 27, 1971, about 60 civilians, most of them elderly people, were killed by soldiers in a mosque in the village of Elabored.

As well as being ruthless and violent, the administration was described -- even by those sympathetic to its cause -- as "inefficient, brutal and corrupt".¹² Senior officers sold the supplies destined for their units, and the governors (the civilian Ras Asrate Kassa and the soldier Lt-Gen Debebe Haile Mariam) and their associates are alleged to have often detained prominent citizens in order to obtain large bribes for their release.

Human Rights Abuses by the Eritrean Fronts

Both the ELF and EPLF committed abuses against human rights during this period. At first, the ELF's Moslem leadership was intolerant of Christians. Some of the first Christians to attempt to join were summarily executed, as were members of a group of university students known as Siriyat Addis. The defection of a large number of Christian fighters in June 1967 presaged the splits that were to destroy the organization in the 1970s. In 1968, the Tripartite Union breakaway group was subject to harassment from partisans of the mainstream ELF based in the western lowlands, and two members were arrested and killed.

After the army atrocities of 1967, there was a widespread demand in the ELF rank and file for retributive attacks on civilian targets. In response, the leadership set up a special unit to engage in hijackings of airplanes. Civilian airplanes were hijacked at Frankfurt in March 1969 and Karachi in June 1969. In neither incident were any passengers injured.

The ELF also set up a special unit known as "*Quattro Cento*," after the death penalty in force during the Italian occupation. Its task was the assassination of civilians associated with the government. Gwynne Roberts, a journalist who travelled with the ELF in mid-1975, estimated that at that time the ELF were carrying out about 15 assassinations each

¹¹ Godfrey Morrison, *Eritrea and the Southern Sudan: Aspects of Some Wider African Problems*, London, Minority Rights Group, 1971, p. 29.

¹² Erlich, 1983, p. 39.

week. Those accused of collaboration were sent two warnings, and if they ignored both, an assassination squad was dispatched. Roberts also saw numerous civilians who were detained by the ELF for having failed to give them assistance, or on suspicion of collaborating with the government.¹³ The Tripartite Union and the EPLF also carried out assassinations. On April 14, 1970, two judges who had earlier sentenced rebel fighters to death were shot dead in a bar in Asmara together with four other people present.

The ELF levied taxes and enacted reprisals against villages and individuals who refused to cooperate. In one of several similar incidents in 1971, 52 Christian villagers were burned to death in their huts in a village named Debre Sila for non-payment of ELF demands.¹⁴ On March 7, 1971, the ELF plundered the village of Halib Menal, stealing many cattle, after the villagers had killed two ELF fighters while resisting an ELF attempt to occupy the village two days before. Individuals who failed to protect ELF property entrusted to them were also summarily executed.

The organization also repeatedly demanded cash payments from Christian missions in its operational areas, and on occasions confiscated medicines from hospitals and pharmacies.

There were several instances in which the fronts took European and American hostages. For example, on May 24, 1974, the ELF attacked the American Mission Hospital at Ghinda, and seized an Eritrean nurse and an American missionary as hostages. The nurse was summarily killed the same day because she could not keep up with her captors' walking pace; the American was released unharmed after three weeks. In 1975 and 1976, both the ELF and EPLF took US servicemen at Kagnew base as hostages; at one point the ELF threatened to try two servicemen for the damage and deaths caused by US-supplied munitions. The ELF also kidnapped three British tourists, while the EPLF took Mr B. H. Burwood-Taylor, the British honorary consul, from his office in central Asmara and kept him for five months. All were released unharmed, though Mr Burwood-Taylor was kept in solitary confinement for extended periods.

The Eritrean War and the Revolution

The war in Eritrea was a principal cause of the revolution of 1974 which overthrew the Emperor Haile Selassie and brought to power the

¹³ *The Financial Times*, London, October 24, 1975.

¹⁴ *Africa Contemporary Record*, 1971-72, p. B113.

Provisional Military Administrative Committee, known by the Amharic word for "committee", the Dergue. Senior army officers came to believe that the war could not be won by military means, and that a negotiated settlement was needed.

Ironically, the revolution followed two years in which there were fewer army offensives, and much of the military activity consisted in the war launched by the ELF against the EPLF to enforce unity. The government tried to sow dissension in the Eritrean ranks; attempting to inflame the civil war between ELF and EPLF. Over half of the Ethiopian regular army was stationed in Eritrea, a total of 25,000 men. Regular patrols continued, together with the attempted enforcement of the protected villages strategy, and punitive missions after successful ELF or EPLF guerrilla raids.

After a spate of assassinations by the rebels in June 1974 -- including the killing of an army colonel -- the army burned the village of Om Hager, near the Sudanese border, in July. The villagers were ordered to collect in the local stadium. After waiting for two hours, soldiers opened fire with machine guns. At least 54 civilians were shot dead and a further 73 drowned while trying to swim a flooded river. Some reports indicate that 17 elders were burned to death in a hut. About 4,000 refugees fled to Sudan. The new military head of state, General Aman Andom, himself an Eritrean, apologized for the massacre and promised compensation. This was never paid.

General Aman himself was killed in November in a shoot-out with an army unit sent to arrest him by Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam, who was emerging as the strongman of the Dergue. Aman had advocated compromise with the Eritrean fronts; Mengistu wanted to settle the problem by force of arms. Starting in 1974, Mengistu made every effort to increase the size of the armed forces. During the years 1974-6, military assistance from the US was actually increased. However, the amounts provided fell short of Mengistu's ambitions.

The intervention of the citizens of Asmara after the battle of Wolki in October 1974 forced the ELF and the EPLF to try to settle their differences by negotiation. An agreement was reached at Koazien in January 1975 and the two fronts then began a concerted war on the government. In May 1975, at its second congress, the ELF voted out a number of exiled leaders and emphasized unity with the EPLF. Ahmad Nasir became the new chairman. The EPLF broke with Osman Saleh Sabbe (then head of its foreign mission) and adopted a radical socialist program at its first congress in January 1977. Sabbe then founded a third front -- the ELF-Popular Liberation Forces (ELF-PLF) -- and a series of triangular negotiations ensued; unity was not, however, achieved.

Between 1975 and 1977 the fronts succeeded in overrunning almost the entire territory, save Asmara, Massawa and the small town of Barentu in the west. At this time, the fighters of the ELF and EPLF outnumbered the Ethiopian forces, and their victory appeared to be inevitable. This was the first significant military threat faced by the new government of the Dergue.

The Siege of Asmara, 1975

Following Aman's death, the level of violence increased in Eritrea, with the ELF and EPLF closing in on Asmara. Some guerrillas infiltrated the city on December 22. In retaliation, at least 50 Eritrean youths were killed by security forces, 18 of them strangled with piano wire on the night of December 23. ELF and EPLF commando units attacked installations in the city, including civilian targets. On December 22, a grenade attack killed six civilians. In mid-January, the US Information Service building and the main post office were attacked with grenades.

On January 31, 1975, the Eritrean fronts launched an attack on Asmara city. The attack started with a rocket attack on an army post, and there were a number of battles in nearby villages and on the outskirts of the city. Despite fierce fighting, the city remained under government control.

Over the following four days, government soldiers went on the rampage through the city. Civilians were dragged from their houses and executed. Soldiers opened fire on passing cars -- in one incident, six people were killed in a minibus. Passers by were stopped and shot dead. The soldiers looted and pillaged, in some instances cutting away women's ears to seize their earrings. According to eye-witness reports obtained by journalists who arrived in the city a week later, the soldiers used their bayonets when they ran out of bullets.¹⁵ There are reliable reports that exactly 100 civilians were killed at the village of Woki Debra, just outside the city. About 50 people were killed at Adi Sogdo.

The government claimed that 124 civilians were killed by "stray bullets," during the four days of killing, but in a rare admission of a greater degree of responsibility, executed 13 soldiers for "excesses" and transferred 90 others in mid February. Journalists obtained reliable accounts of 331 civilian deaths, and other sources claimed that up to 3,000 were killed. The number of combatants killed by on all sides was about 3,000.

¹⁵ Dial Torgerson, *The Guardian*, London, February 15, 1975.

After the failure of the ELF-EPLF attempt to capture Asmara, the war intensified in the countryside as both sides prepared for a prolonged siege. The EPLF estimated that 110 villages were partly or wholly destroyed by the army in 1975. During February–April there were a number of massacres in different parts of Eritrea, with tens or hundreds killed on each occasion: Harkiko in the eastern lowlands, Adi Worehi Sub, Waulki and Guilla in the west. In one incident at the village of Woki Debah on March 13, a group of soldiers travelling between Asmara and Keren rounded up a group of villagers early in the morning and shot dead 37. Some of the survivors fled; others remained behind. The following day the soldiers returned and burned the entire village, reportedly killing 500 people by shooting and stabbing with bayonets. Many livestock were also slaughtered.

After a lull, later in the year there were more killings of civilians, usually in reprisals for rebel attacks. Three families were shot dead in Asmara in August. On August 22, at least six boys were killed in Asmara. A number of villages were destroyed in air attacks.

As the ELF and EPLF besieged Asmara, the government used a blockade of food in order to try to sap their strength. Checkpoints around the city prevented food from being smuggled by sympathizers to the guerrillas. The import of food from Tigray was also severely curtailed, and the Ethiopian Red Cross was prevented from bringing in food relief. Brig.-Gen. Getachew Nadew, the military administrator, explained the blockade in these terms, made familiar by Mao Zedong: "if you wish to kill the fish, first you must dry the sea."¹⁶ These measures brought considerable hardship to the rebel fighters, who were compelled to rely on food brought by camel trains from the Sudan border. These supplies were subject to ambush and aerial bombardment, and were inadequate. Journalist Gwynne Roberts described the ELF fighters as running short of food, and surviving on reduced diets.¹⁷ As some of the villages near Asmara ran out of food, ELF units were forced to withdraw. In and around Asmara, the price of food rose more than twenty-fold, to highs surpassing those reached in the 1984/5 famine. Despite the food crisis – indeed famine – the government maintained its blockade, and prevented significant food imports until the military situation had improved.

¹⁶ Quoted in: *Sunday Times*, London, September 7, 1975.

¹⁷ *Financial Times*, London, October 22, 1975.

The Peasants' March

1976 and 1977 saw relatively fewer atrocities in Eritrea. This was related to a number of factors, including several rounds of peace negotiations and the government's experience in 1975 that each massacre merely drove people into the arms of the rebel fronts. The most important reason, however, was that the two main offensives planned into Eritrea failed to reach the territory.

In 1976, Mengistu planned to overcome the problem of a relative shortage of armaments by resorting to a traditional Ethiopian tactic -- a mass levy of peasant soldiers, mobilized with the promise of booty and land in the enemy territory. The soldiers were told that they could take any land for themselves, after first driving the Eritreans from it.

The "Peasants March" on Eritrea was planned and implemented starting in March 1976. Major Atnafu Abate, a close friend of Mengistu, was responsible for the march. About 50,000 peasants, most of them from Wollo, were recruited. Some were volunteers, tempted by the government's promises, others were forcibly conscripted. Most were given antiquated surplus rifles from the armory, some were unarmed -- told they would be able to obtain weapons from dead rebels. Without training, the peasants began to march northwards. Meanwhile, in April the government summarily ordered out all foreigners engaged in evangelical or humanitarian work in Eritrea, closed all mission hospitals and confiscated most of the equipment.

Despite intense diplomatic pressure from the US, which objected to this "medieval" manner of conducting warfare, the march went ahead. However, the untrained peasant army was no match for the Eritreans -- or indeed the newly-formed Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF). On the night of June 1/2, a surprise attack on the marchers was made at Zalenbessa, in Tigray, before they even entered Eritrea, and over 1,200 were killed and the remainder dispersed. Much light weaponry fell into the hands of the TPLF.

Offensive and Counter-Offensives, 1977

Atnafu and Mengistu then proceeded with a second plan for an offensive in Eritrea. Atnafu planned to create over 55,000 "Defense of the Revolution" squads, containing about 300,000 militiamen with three months' military training. (At different times, government members spoke of a force numbering between 200,000 and 500,000; probably 150,000 were actually recruited by mid-1977.) The militiamen were to march first on rebel forces in Gonder and Tigray, and then on Eritrea.

Implementation of this plan started in December 1976. In February 1977, Mengistu eliminated senior members of the Dergue who advocated negotiation with the Eritrean fronts, including the Dergue chairman, General Teferi Bante. In April 1977, the first contingents were sent to Gonder (see chapter 3). ELF forces crossed into Gonder to engage the militia in June, but the planned offensive into Eritrea was overtaken by events -- Somalia invaded the Ogaden, and the militia were diverted to the southeast.

Regular military units remained active in Eritrea, and there were numerous instances of violence against civilians, though not on the scale of 1975. In early March 1977, a naval unit killed between 100 and 160 civilians at the Red Sea village of Imberemi. On March 31, 1977, army units reportedly killed 42 civilians in reprisal for actions by the fronts.

During 1977, the Eritrean fronts remained on the offensive. They were able to enter Asmara at will -- in June the ELF displayed its confidence by taking a British journalist into the city at night. Starting in March, both fronts began to capture provincial towns -- Nacfa in March, Tessenei and Afabet in April, Keren and Decamhare in July, Mendefera in August. They appeared poised for an assault on Asmara. The main factor deterring the attack was a fear of renewed conflict between the ELF and EPLF -- the "Angola-ization" of Eritrea.

In early 1978, the Ethiopian administration in Eritrea made an estimate for the cost of the war over the previous sixteen and a half years. According to the estimate, 13,000 soldiers and between 30,000 and 50,000 civilians had been killed or wounded. (No figure was given for casualties among the ELF and EPLF.) There were more than 200,000 Eritreans forced into exile over half of them in Sudan. The financial cost in terms of damage to property and the expenses of pursuing the war amounted to US\$1.2 billion.¹⁸

¹⁸ Quoted in UN Commission on Human Rights, "A Study on Human Rights and Mass Exoduses," by Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, Annex II, 1981, para. 32.

3. REBELLION AND FAMINE IN THE NORTH UNDER HAILE SELASSIE

Northern Marginalization under Shewan Rule

The northern provinces of Gonder, Gojjam, Wollo and Tigray are the heartland of the "core" culture of Ethiopia -- the Ethiopian Orthodox church, the Amharic language and script, plow-based agriculture, and many elements of the social system of the country derive from this historic region. Most of the Emperors also came from here.

At the end of the 19th century, the center of power in Ethiopia decisively shifted from the north to Shewa, with the assumption of the title of Emperor by Menelik, King of Shewa. Menelik was an Amhara, from the dynasty that ruled Manz, at the northern tip of the modern province of Shewa. The majority of the inhabitants of the rest of Shewa were Oromo -- as is the case today. In terms of descent, the group that became politically dominant in Shewa (and subsequently in Ethiopia) was a mixture of Amhara and Oromo; in terms of language, religion and cultural practices, it was Amhara. The northern Amhara regarded the Shewans as "Galla" (the pejorative term for Oromo),¹ and together with the Tigrayans and some of the Agau and Oromo people in Wollo, resisted the new Shewan domination, which led to their economic and political marginalization.

Revolt in Wollo

Between 1928 and 1930 there was a rebellion -- or a series of rebellions -- in northern Wollo against Shewan domination. The specific political cause was support for Ras Gugsa Wale, a northern Amhara lord with a strong claim on the throne, against the Shewan Ras Teferi (who crowned himself the Emperor Haile Selassie after defeating the revolt). The government suppression of the revolt led to quartering soldiers with local people, interrupting the salt trade, and involved massive looting and confiscation of cattle. Combined with drought and locusts, the result was famine.² Haile Selassie ordered the importation of grain from India to supply Addis Ababa, but there was no relief for north Wollo. Political measures were taken after the revolt, including the replacement of much

¹ Gerry Salole, "Who are the Shoans?" *Horn of Africa*, 2, (1978), pp. 20-9.

² James McCann, *From Poverty to Famine in Northeast Ethiopia: A Rural History, 1900-1935*, Philadelphia, 1987.

of the administration, which formerly had local roots, with appointees from Shewa; and the joining of the rebellious districts to the province of southern Wollo, which was ruled with harshness and venality by the crown prince. These helped to contribute to the further marginalization of the area, and the series of famines which plagued the area up to the fall of the Emperor.

The cumulative impact of imperial misrule and the petty tyrannies of local landlords created an atmosphere in which development was extremely difficult, as described by two consultants investigating the possibility of starting livestock projects:

Wollo is virtually impossible ... there is such an obscuring weight of disbelief, suspected innuendo and antagonisms; such a mess of misgovernment at petty levels, and such a lading of landlords that there is almost nothing to start with and nowhere to start that will not go wrong or sour ... [there is] the smothering welter of the weeds of an entrenched and stagnant society.³

The Weyane in Tigray

Following the restoration of Haile Selassie after the defeat of the Italians in 1941, there was a revolt in Tigray. Known as the *Weyane*, this was the most serious internal threat that Haile Selassie faced. An alliance of the Oromo semi-pastoralists of Raya Azebo, disgruntled peasants, and some local feudal lords, under the military leadership of a famous *shifita*, Haile Mariam Redda, the rebels nearly succeeded in overrunning the whole province.⁴ British aircraft had to be called in from Aden in order to bomb the rebels to ensure their defeat. While some of the aristocratic leaders, such as Ras Seyoum Mengesha, were treated gently and ultimately allowed to return and administer the recalcitrant province, there were reprisals against the ordinary people. Most notably, the Raya and Azebo Oromo were subjected to wholesale land alienation, and much of their territory was transferred to the province of Wollo. This area was badly hit in subsequent famines, partly as a consequence.

³ Noel J. Cossins and Bekele Yemeran, "Still Sleep the Highlands: A Study of Farm and Livestock Systems in the Central Highlands of Ethiopia," Addis Ababa, 1973, p. 2.10.

⁴ Gebru Tareke, "Peasant Resistance in Ethiopia: The Case of Weyane," *Journal of African History*, 25, (1984), pp. 77-92.

Tax Revolts in Gojjam

Gojjam treasured its independence for centuries, and did not submit willingly to Shewan rule. The issue around which opposition repeatedly coalesced was any attempt by the central government to measure land and tax it. Taxation was not only resented as the imposition of unjust exactions by government, but was feared as the means whereby the traditional land tenure system would be undermined, and the farmers' independence destroyed.

In the 1940s and '50s there was a series of attempts to measure land in Gojjam, prior to taxation. In the face of peasant resistance, including violence, all attempts failed. In the early 1960s, only 0.1 per cent of the land had been measured, and Gojjam, one of the richest and most populous provinces, paid less land tax than the poor and thinly populated province of Bale.⁵ In 1950/1 there was armed resistance, including a plot to assassinate Haile Selassie. However the most serious revolt occurred in 1968, in response to the most systematic attempt to levy an agricultural income tax to date.

In February 1968, in reaction to the arrival of parties of government officials accompanied by armed police, the peasants of Mota and Bichena districts resorted to armed resistance. After months of stalemate while much of the province remained out of government control, Haile Selassie sent troops to Gojjam in July and August. The air force bombed several villages; it burned houses but its main task was probably intimidating the resistance. Several hundred people died, according to contemporary accounts, but the Gojjamis remained defiant. Finally, in December, Haile Selassie backed down. He visited Gojjam in 1969, canceled all tax arrears, and made no serious attempt to collect the new taxes.

Famines in Wollo and Tigray

In 1974, the Emperor Haile Selassie became notorious for his attempts to conceal the existence of the famine of 1972-3 in Wollo. This, however, was only one in a succession of such incidents. Prof. Mesfin Wolde Mariam of Addis Ababa University has documented how the famines of 1958 and 1966 in Tigray and Wollo were treated with official indifference, bordering on hostility towards the peasants who were considered sufficiently

⁵ Peter Schwab, *Decision-Making in Ethiopia: A Study of the Political Process*, London, 1972, pp. 4, 159.

ungrateful for the divinely-sanctioned rule of Haile Selassie as to allow themselves to defame his reputation by dying of famine.

There was severe famine in Tigray in 1958 which went without significant government relief. In 1965/6, reports of famine from Were Ilu *awraja* in Wollo arrived at the Ministry of the Interior in November 1965, one month after the situation became clear to the local police, but no action was taken. The information took a further 302 days to reach the Emperor, who then requested the Ministry of the Interior to act -- which it did by asking officials in Wollo to send a list of the names of the people who had died.⁶ A small relief distribution was then authorized. The only consistent response to famine was to regard it as a security problem -- famine created destitute migrants, who needed to be prevented from entering towns, particularly Addis Ababa.

Both the 1958 and 1965/6 famines killed tens of thousands of people.

The famine that struck Wollo during 1972-3 played a crucial role in Ethiopian history: the revelation of that famine by the British television journalist Jonathan Dimbleby played a key role in precipitating the downfall of the rule of Haile Selassie. Between 40,000 and 80,000 people died.⁷ The famine also led directly to the creation of the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC), the powerful government department mandated to prevent and ameliorate future famines, and to coordinate international assistance. The 1972-3 famine was the last one in which there were no functioning mechanisms for the delivery of large-scale humanitarian relief.

The Wollo famine was popularly blamed on drought, a backward and impoverished social system, and the cover-up attempted by the imperial government.⁸ These factors were all important -- though it must be remembered that specific actions by the government, especially after the Ras Gugsa and Weyane revolts, were instrumental in creating the absence

⁶ Mesfin Wolde Mariam, *Rural Vulnerability to Famine in Ethiopia - 1958-1977*, London, 1986, p. 106.

⁷ John Seaman and Julius Holt, "The Ethiopian Famine of 1973-4: I. Wollo Province," *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society*, 34, 1975, p. 114A. The Ethiopian Nutrition Institute calculated a figure of 200,000 deaths but this appears to have been based on over-pessimistic assumptions about the size of the famine-affected population.

⁸ Failure to relieve a famine already under way can scarcely be called a *cause* of that famine, but popular coverage of "the politics of famine" continues to focus on the politics of famine *relief*, failing to draw the necessary distinction between the two.

of development. In addition, forcible alienation of resources and violence also played an important role.

The group that suffered most from the famine were the Afar pastoral nomads of the Danakil desert. Famine had already gripped them in early 1972. The Afar inhabit an arid semi-wilderness, utilizing pastures over a large area to support their herds. In times of drought, they are forced to move to areas which they do not normally exploit. Traditional drought reserves included the Tcheffa Valley, on the rift valley escarpment, and pastures along the inland delta of the Awash river where the waters dissipate into the desert. In the 1960s the Tcheffa Valley became the location of commercial sorghum farms, and small farmers from nearby also began to use much of the land. Meanwhile, large cotton plantations were developed along the Awash. By 1972, 50,000 hectares of irrigated land had displaced 20,000 Afar pastoralists.⁹

During the years of good rainfall, the loss of the drought reserves was not noticed by the Afar, but when repeated drought struck, they found that a necessary resource they had utilized sporadically for generations had been alienated, without compensation. Famine among the Afar was certainly caused by drought -- but by drought acting on a society that had been deprived of the means of responding to that threat.

Official indifference to the plight of the Afar is illustrated by an incident in 1974, when the flood waters of the Awash river were directed to the Dubti valley in order to irrigate cotton plantations. The resident Afar population was not informed, and 3,000 lost their homes, while 100 were "missing."¹⁰

Mobility is crucial to survival among the Afar. Nomadic in normal times, the ability to move freely over large distances becomes a vital concern when resources are short. In the early 1970s, the Afar's mobility was further restricted by the flow of weaponry to their nomadic neighbors and competitors, the Issa (who are ethnic Somali). The Issa themselves were suffering from the alienation of much of their pasture and restrictions on their movement. The result was an attempt by the Afar to appropriate wells formerly used by the Issa. This led to widespread armed clashes, especially in 1972. One Afar reported "Many people die. Disease is the

⁹ Maknun Gamaledin, "State policy and famine in the Awash Valley of Ethiopia," in D. Anderson and R. Grove (eds.), *Conservation in Africa*, Cambridge, 1987, p. 335.

¹⁰ RRC, "Food Shortage Report on Wello, 1979; Annex: A Profile of Disasters in Wello," Addis Ababa, 1979, p. 53.

first cause but the Issa are the second."¹¹ Meanwhile, a survey done among the Issa reported that homicide by the Afar was a major cause of death.¹² The famine also resulted in large-scale armed clashes between the Afar and their Oromo neighbors in Wollo.

The second group which suffered severely from the famine included farmers in a narrow strip of middle-altitude areas of northern and central Wollo. Those who suffered most were tenants. The Raya and Azebo Oromo had been reduced to that state by massive land alienation after they participated in the *Weyane* revolt against Haile Selassie in 1943. Others were forced to mortgage or sell their land by the stresses of repeated harvest failures in the early 1970s. Landlords took advantage of their tenants' penury by insisting on the payment of large rents, often in kind. This demand could be backed up by force, as most influential landlords had a retinue of armed guards. The enforcement of crippling tenancy contracts in time of shortage had the effect of taking food from the hungry. Thus, during 1973, the famine area exported grain to the provincial capital, Dessie, and to Addis Ababa.

The famine was much less severe in Tigray province, despite the drought affecting both provinces. The difference can be largely accounted for by the different modes of land tenure -- in Tigray, most farmers owned their own land; in middle-land Wollo, most were tenants.¹³

Finally, the Emperor Haile Selassie considered that the peasants and nomads of Wollo were shaming His reputation by starving, and resolved to ignore them. Reports of famine were consistently ignored or denied. In response to a report by UNICEF documenting famine conditions in July 1973, the Vice-Minister of Planning retorted: "If we have to describe the situation in the way you have in order to generate international assistance, then we don't want that assistance. The embarrassment to the government isn't worth it. Is that perfectly clear?"¹⁴

¹¹ Quoted in: Noel J. Cossins, "No Way to Live: A Study of the Afar Clans of the North-East Rangelands," Addis Ababa, Livestock and Meat Board, 1972, p. 51.

¹² J. Seaman, J. Holt and J. Rivers, "The Effects of Drought on Human Nutrition in an Ethiopian Province," *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 7, 1978, p. 37.

¹³ K. J. Lundstrom, *North-East Ethiopia: Society in Famine*, Uppsala, 1976.

¹⁴ Quoted in: Paul H. Brietzke, *Law, Development and the Ethiopian Revolution*, Lewisburg, 1982, p. 127.

Though the governor of Wollo, Crown Prince Asfa Wossen, was both greedy and incompetent (at the time of the famine he forced the closure of commercial sorghum farms in the Tcheffa Valley by engaging in litigation, claiming their ownership), Haile Selassie was never in ignorance of the conditions in Wollo. A UN official visited him in early 1973 and found him well-informed -- his attitude was that peasants always starve and nothing can be done, and that in any case it was not the Shewan Amhara who were dying.¹⁵ On belatedly visiting the province in November 1973, his one remedial action was to announce that all who had sold or mortgaged their land in the previous year could return and plow it during the coming season, only leaving it to their creditors afterwards.¹⁶ Even this minimal and tardy gesture was not enforced.

The 1975 Northern Rebellions

The Wollo famine contributed to the downfall of Haile Selassie, not because the hungry peasants and nomads revolted and forced him out, but because the issue gained political currency among the students and middle classes of Addis Ababa. However, that is not to say that the famine, and more generally the eight decades of political marginalization and economic stagnation that preceded it, did not have serious consequences at the time of the 1974 revolution and the years following.

In the early 1970s, "peasant risings in various provinces [were] an even more closely guarded secret than the famine".¹⁷ These revolts intensified in during the revolution, with a series of rebellions led by feudal leaders in each of the northern provinces. In Wollo, there was a revolt by a feudal lord, Dejazmatch Berhane Maskal. In March 1975, he destroyed an Ethiopian airlines DC3 at Lalibella. In October, he rallied supporters after a spree of killings of former landlords by peasants and government security officers. Dej. Berhane's ill-armed force of 5,000 was defeated by government militia and air force attacks near Woldiya in December 1975, but he continued to cause problems for the government for years. Another feudal leader, Gugsu Ambow, had brief military successes in northern Wollo, before the army foiled an attempt to capture Korem in mid-1976,

¹⁵ Brietzke, 1982, pp. 126-7.

¹⁶ Lundstrom, 1976, pp. 52-3.

¹⁷ Lionel Cliffe, "Capitalism or Feudalism? The Famine in Ethiopia," *Review of African Political Economy*, 1, 1974, pp. 34-40.

reportedly causing 1,200 fatalities among Gugs'a's peasant army and local villagers.¹⁸ Other smaller revolts occurred in Gojjam and Shewa.

The most significant rebellion started in Tigray. This was an insurrection led by the former governor, Ras Mengesha Seyoum (son of the governor at the time of the 1943 Weyane). Ras Mengesha fled to the hills with about 600 followers in November 1984, when the Dergue executed 60 officials of the previous regime. Ras Mengesha combined with other members of the aristocracy, notably General Negga Tegegne (former governor of Gonder) and formed the Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU) in 1976. They obtained encouragement from western countries. With Sudanese military assistance, the EDU occupied the towns of Metema, Humera and Dabat (all in Gonder province) between February and April 1977,¹⁹ but was defeated by the militia force sent to the province in June–July.

The EDU remained active in Tigray, where two other rebel groups were also operational. The Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) was set up in February 1975 by a group of left-wing students and peasants, incorporating the Tigray National Organization, created three years earlier. Prominent among its early leaders was Berihu Aregawi; later the front was headed by Meles Zenawi. In 1978, the TPLF set up the Relief Society of Tigray (REST), headed by Abadi Zemo. It espoused a mix of Tigrayan nationalism and socialist transformation. The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), after defeat in the urban Red Terror (see chapter 6), retreated to a base in rural eastern Tigray in mid-1977.

The EDU was rent by divisions between its leaders, and its aristocratic leaders failed to gain popular support among their erstwhile tenants. Crucially, it suffered defeat at the hands of the TPLF.²⁰ The EPRP was also defeated by the TPLF and driven into Gonder, creating lasting bitterness between the two organization.

¹⁸ Michael Dobbs, "A bloody farewell to feudalism," *The Guardian*, London, November 24, 1976.

¹⁹ Sudanese military support for the EDU was given in retaliation for the Ethiopian government's backing for the Sudanese opposition National Front, headed by Sadiq el Mahdi, which had staged an unsuccessful armed insurrection to overthrow the government of Jaafar Nimeiri in July 1976.

²⁰ The two organizations later fought in the refugee camps in Sudan, for example in May 1979 and July 1982. The latter attack, in which eleven refugees died, was instigated by the EDU. Ahmad Karadawi, "Refugee Policy in the Sudan, 1967–1984," DPhil thesis, Oxford, 1988, pp. 181, 193.

After the ill-fated Peasants' March of 1976, the government launched a series of five military offensives in Tigray: November 1976, June 1978, October–November 1978, March–April 1979 and May–June 1979. Small towns such as Abi Adi changed hands several times. By 1979, REST estimated that 50,000 people in Tigray were displaced on account of war. Refugees from Tigray and Gonder began to arrive in Sudan in early 1975. By May there were 34,000; by 1978 there were 70,000. In February 1979, the Ethiopian army invaded Sudanese territory at Jebel Ludgi, forcing the evacuation of the nearby refugee camp of Wad el Hileui.²¹

Fighting against the Afar

Another serious though short-lived rebellion occurred among the Afar. The Afar leader and Sultan of Awsa, Ali Mirrah, had been accorded a high degree of autonomy by Haile Selassie, and the well-armed Afar had never come fully under the administrative or military control of the government. Ali Mirrah was also a large landowner and feared the confiscation of his cotton plantations in the land reform. This brought him into conflict with the government, and on June 1, 1975, a military force was dispatched to arrest the Sultan at his headquarters. Ali Mirrah escaped to Djibouti, but his followers launched a coordinated series of attacks on military outposts on June 3, and claimed to have killed several hundred soldiers. Many unarmed Amhara laborers in the Awash cotton plantations were also massacred.

Government reprisals were swift. Starting at Assaita in the Awash valley on June 3, and expanding to an arc stretching from Mille in the west, passing through Awsa to Serdo in the east, the army attacked towns, agricultural schemes, and Afar nomads' encampments.

The cotton plantations had a large labor force, including Moslem Eritreans, local Afars and highland Amharas. The army selectively killed Eritreans and Afars. Refugees in Djibouti reported that 221 Afar workers were killed. Women and children were gunned down as they tried to flee on tractors. In one incident in mid-June, 18 men were shot dead on a bridge. The killing then spread to the towns. An estimated 300 died in Awsa and 100 in Assaita, including the Imam, killed in his mosque. The soldiers also spread out into the countryside and attacked small Afar villages and cattle camps. While many of the casualties were armed Afar men (the distinction between a civilian and combatant is a fine one among the Afar) women and children were also killed when tanks and artillery bombarded

²¹ Karadawi, 1988, p. 117.

cattle camps and troops opened fire. The killing lasted six weeks. Estimates for the total number of civilian casualties amount to more than 1,000; some run as high as 4,000.

One of those killed was a young British social anthropologist, Glynn Flood, who was arrested by the army and detained. According to other people detained in the same prison, after two weeks he was taken out by four soldiers, and then they heard a scream. It is assumed that he was bayoneted to death and his body thrown into the river Awash. Government officials had tried to stop Mr Flood from going to the area a week earlier, and it is probable that he was murdered in order to prevent him from producing evidence of the killings.

In exile, Ali Mirrah founded the Afar Liberation Front (ALF). His son, Hanafari conducted military operations and succeeded in closing the strategic Assab-Addis Ababa highway. The government responded by the twin tactics of another military campaign, and giving some leading Afar positions within the administration and a measure of autonomy. A faction led by Habib Mohamed Yahyo was given a large quantity of arms, and proved to be a loyal supporter of the government.²² These tactics prevented the ALF from posing a major military threat, though it was able to mount occasional attacks throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

²² There is a dispute over the Sultanate of Awsa between the families of Ali Mirrah and Habib Yahyo going back several generations.

4. INSURRECTION AND INVASION IN THE SOUTHEAST, 1962-78

Introduction

Wars have been fought continually in southeast Ethiopia for as long as in Eritrea. The two principal subjugated peoples of the region -- the Oromo and the ethnic Somali inhabitants of the Ogaden -- have been staging insurrections more or less continually since the early 1960s. The first phase of the wars lasted until 1977, with the government utilizing a set of counter-insurgency strategies familiar from Eritrea, though arguably more successfully. The second phase was a large-scale conventional war which began when the Somali army invaded the Ogaden in July 1977, concluding when the Ethiopian army defeated that invasion in March 1978. A protracted third phase began after that victory, with a return to counter-insurgency warfare; that is the subject of the following chapter.

Southeast Ethiopia consists of well-watered highland areas, largely inhabited by Oromo people, who practice a mix of agriculture and livestock raising, and drier lowlands, known as the Ogaden. The Ogaden is inhabited by ethnic Somalis belonging to 12 different clans, among whom the Ogaden clan is numerically dominant. Other important clans include the Issa, to the north of the Harerghe highlands, and the Isaaq, who inhabit the Haud reserve, an area adjacent to northern Somalia.¹ The Somalis are largely pastoral nomads. The population of the Ogaden itself is about one million; the surrounding Oromo areas contain a much larger number of people.

At Independence in 1960, the Somali government laid claim to the Ogaden and adjoining Oromo areas in the Bale and Harerghe highlands.

The Conquest of the Oromo and the Ogaden Somali

Between 1886 and 1889, the Emperor Menelik conquered the independent Oromo states of Arsi and Bale, and occupied the trading city of Harer, which is a holy city for Moslems. Menelik then laid claim to the vast desert area of the Ogaden.² This claim was recognized by the

¹ Until 1960 known as British Somaliland; in 1991 the Somali National Movement, controlling the area, unilaterally declared independence and named it the Republic of Somaliland.

² This claim was made with Italian encouragement, partly in order to prevent the British annexing the area to British-occupied northern Somaliland.

European powers in 1910, though effective occupation of the area was not attempted until after the Second World War.

Amhara domination followed. In the context of southern Ethiopia, the term "Amhara" needs to be treated with care. While the Amhara who came to the south as conquerors originated from all parts of the northern highlands, all came as vassals of the specifically Shewan Amhara state. Local people, whatever their origins, were also able to assimilate into the Amhara class, by virtue of marriage, or adopting the religion, language and cultural traits of the Amhara. A social anthropologist working in the neighboring province of Arsi noted that for the indigenous Oromo "Amhara" and 'self-satisfied dominant elite' have become convergent categories.³

In the highland areas of the southeast, Amhara *neftegna* were given grants of land, with accompanying rights to extract produce from the local population. The indigenous peoples were unhappy with the loss of their independence and with the new burdens imposed upon them by their Amhara overlords, and armed resistance was frequent. The Italian conquest of 1935 came as a liberation from Amhara rule for many inhabitants of the southeast; and after Haile Selassie was restored there was intermittent armed resistance against the re-imposition of the hated land tenure and taxation systems, notably in Harerghe in 1942, 1947/8 and 1955.

When Somalia gained its independence in 1960, there was agitation in the Ogaden ("western Somalia") for independence, or for separation from Ethiopia to join the Somali state. The Somali government set up the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) in that year. There was a revolt in the Ogaden in 1963-4, which was put down with customary brutality (see below).

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw the growth of an Oromo nationalist movement. This was first expressed through traditional-style *shifita* rebellion in Bale and Harerghe, and in the creation of Oromo community associations among groups in Shewa, Wollega and Arsi.

The 1960s Rebellion in Highland Bale

The rebellion in Bale was the outcome of the systematically brutal subjugation of an indigenous population by a ruling class of armed settlers drawn largely from the Shewan Amhara. John Markakis has written of the conditions preceding the revolt:

³ Paul Baxter, "Ethiopia's Unacknowledged Problem: The Oromo," *African Affairs*, 77, (1978), pp. 283-96.

The legal exactions of the state and the landlords were compounded by a host of illegal impositions levied by the ruling class on the peasantry, usually associated with matters related to land. Land measurement, classification, registration, inheritance, litigation and so on were matters that could be concluded only through the payment of enforced bribes to a series of officials, and were subject to the risk of fraud in the process. Tax payment itself required the running of a gauntlet manned by officials who had to be bribed to conclude the transaction properly. Venality, the hallmark of Ethiopian officialdom throughout the empire, reached its apogee in the conquered areas of the south, where the hapless peasantry had no recourse against it. Northern officials serving in the south hoped to amass a small fortune during their tour of duty, and to acquire land through grant, purchase or other means. The scale of their exploits in Bale affronted even some of their colleagues ... There was precious little return for such impositions.⁴

Armed rebellion started in highland Bale in 1962, fanned by both encouragement from the newly-independent Somali government, and the heavy handed response of the governor. The rebels were led by a minor chief named Wako Gutu, and used traditional *shifita*-style tactics, with no central command. Fighting gradually intensified until late 1966, when it was clear that the provincial police and militia could not contain the revolt, whereupon the government declared a state of emergency and called in the army.⁵ There were ground assaults and aerial bombardments in both highland and lowland Bale in the early months of 1967, involving much indiscriminate violence against civilians. There were also punitive measures such as land confiscation, restrictions on nomads' seasonal migrations and heavy fines levied on uncooperative communities. By 1968 more than a quarter of the land was classified as confiscated.⁶ In order to recover their land, farmers needed to pay their tax arrears -- a daunting prospect in view of the epidemic corruption of the administration. However the rebels could not be dislodged from their mountainous, forested base.

⁴ John Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa*, Cambridge, 1987, p. 194.

⁵ Patrick Gilkes, *The Dying Lion: Feudalism and Modernization in Ethiopia*, London, 1975, pp. 214-18.

⁶ Markakis, 1987, p. 200.

Military tactics then changed to a pacification approach, avoiding direct military confrontation on the ground. Roads were built into the rebel heartland, with the assistance of British military engineers. Combined with restrictions on movement and military surveillance of the lowlands, this helped to cut off assistance from Somalia. Air strikes continued, with US technical assistance, aimed at intimidating the rebels and destroying their food supplies (and therefore also the food supplies of the local population). These strategies were combined with leniency towards the rebel leaders, who were allowed to go free or rewarded with lucrative positions.

The final demise of Wako Gutu's forces came in March 1970, after military assistance was cut off by the Somali government, and the tightening noose of government troops ensured that they ran out of food supplies. The government then granted a general amnesty and made various promises to the general population, which it failed to keep. Conditions in Bale at the time of the revolution were almost exactly as they had been a decade earlier.

The Destruction of Oromo Political Movements

The 1960s saw a growth in Oromo cultural, social and political movements. In part this was related to the achievement of independence by African peoples which had been colonized by the European powers -- many educated Oromo aspired to a similar "liberation." An article by an Oromo student leader, Walleign Mekonnen, in a 1969 student publication expresses well the feelings of subjugation:⁷

Ask anybody what Ethiopian culture is? Ask anybody what Ethiopian language is? Ask anybody what Ethiopian music is? Ask about what Ethiopian religion is? Ask about what the national dress is? It is either Amhara or Amhara-Tigre!! To be a "genuine" Ethiopian one has to listen to Amharic music, to accept the Amhara-Tigre religion, Orthodox Christianity, to wear the Amhara-Tigre *shamma* in international conferences. In some cases, to be an "Ethiopian" you will even have to change your name. In short, to be an Ethiopian, you will have to wear an Amhara mask (to use Fanon's expression).

⁷ Quoted in: Randi Ronning Balsvik, *Haile Selassie's Students: The Intellectual and Social Background to Revolution, 1952-1977*, E. Lansing, Mich., 1985, p. 277. Walleign was killed by security forces during an attempted hijack of an Ethiopian Airways airplane. The EPRDF offensive of May 1991 which overran the government's northeast front and led directly to the flight of President Mengistu Haile Mariam was named "Operation Walleign" in honor of this student.

The Mecha-Tulema Self-Help Association, founded in 1962, was the most prominent attempt by the Oromo to organize legally. The association was only legally registered after overcoming considerable opposition from the government. It sponsored specific self-help projects, but had the broader aim of developing an Oromo "national consciousness." In 1966, using the pretext of a bomb explosion in a cinema in Addis Ababa, Haile Selassie cracked down on the Mecha-Tulema Association. Over 100 leading Oromo community leaders were arrested and brought to court, in a trial that was a parody of due process. Based on confessions obtained under torture and other dubious evidence, the two leading defendants were sentenced to death,⁸ and others to long prison sentences. The organization continued an underground existence for several years thereafter.

Revolt in Highland Harerghe

In the mid-1960s, there was also a small insurrection in the highlands of Harerghe. This was led by Sheikh Hussein, a former associate of the Oromo politician Tadesse Birru. The organization was called the Oromo Liberation Front (not to be confused with the second Oromo Liberation Front, founded in 1974), and carried out small-scale guerrilla activities.

In August 1971 Sheikh Hussein changed the name of his organization to the Ethiopian National Liberation Front (ENLF), and incorporated some of Wako Gutu's followers, but thereby also split his movement. By 1973 the ENLF controlled significant areas of the highlands of Harerghe and Bale.

The Revolution and the Oromo Movement

The revolution of 1974 split the Oromo movement. Many of the members of the Dergue were themselves Oromo -- including General Teferi Bante, Chairman from November 1974 until his execution by Mengistu in 1977.⁹ Many of the Dergue's initial programs, notably the land reform of 1975, the change in official designation from the derogatory "Galla" to the more acceptable "Oromo," and the legalization of the use of the Oromo language for public speaking, were welcomed. As a result, the All-

⁸ Lt. Mamo Mazamir was executed for treason. Gen. Tadesse Birru was reprieved by Haile Selassie, and released at the time of the revolution. In 1975 he was rearrested by the Dergue and executed along with a colleague.

⁹ Gen Teferi's father's name was actually Benti (an Oromo name) but he changed it to Bante (an Amhara name) to be more acceptable to the Amhara elite.

Ethiopia Socialist Movement (MEISON), which was led by several prominent Oromos, allied itself with the Dergue from 1975 until it was purged in 1977 (see chapter 6).

The land reform of 1975 gave the Dergue great political capital in the Oromo areas -- which it promptly began to deplete by heavily taxing the peasants and requisitioning food from them for the army and the towns. The land reform also set up Peasant Associations (PAs), with the initial aim of re-distributing land. PAs were given wider-ranging powers shortly afterwards. In the south, most of the PA leadership originally consisted of local people elected with much popular support. This began to change in 1978. The purge of MEISON coincided with a slightly less violent purge of the leadership of the PAs, and the formation of the All-Ethiopia Peasant Association. From this point onwards, PA leaders were all appointed by the government.

Many Oromo leaders went into armed opposition in 1974. They joined defectors from the ENLF and the first Oromo Liberation Front, and founded the (second) Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). This was initially active in the highlands of Bale and Harerghe, and had its first meeting to publish a political program in October of that year. The initial insurrection was a decentralized revolt which encompassed a number of different groups. The government launched two offensives, the first in 1974, and the second in early 1976, using locally-recruited militia. These succeeded in scattering but not suppressing the nascent OLF resistance. Influenced by MEISON, the Dergue entertained hopes of negotiating a compromise with the OLF, and several meetings were held, but without result. By early 1977, the OLF had set up an administration in parts of the Chercher highlands of Harerghe, and was active in Bale, Arsi and Sidamo.¹⁰

In 1976, the Somali government set up a guerrilla force to fight in Oromo areas, as a counterpart of the WSLF, calling it the Somali Abo Liberation Front (SALF).¹¹ Wako Gutu and Sheikh Hussein were among the prominent Oromo nationalists who joined the SALF, which formally superseded the ENLF. The pre-existing split between the ENLF and the OLF, and fears that Somalia harbored irredentist ambitions to annex Oromo areas, using the SALF as a vehicle, led to distrust and at times conflict between the OLF and the SALF.

From 1974 to 1977 insurrection spread through much of the Oromo highlands of southeast Ethiopia.

¹⁰ *Africa Confidential*, 19.11, May 26, 1978, p. 6.

¹¹ "Abo" is a form of greeting common to many peoples in southeastern Ethiopia. The Somali government was eager to avoid use of the name "Oromo."

Ethiopian Rule and Famine in the Ogaden

The inhabitants of the Ogaden received little from the Ethiopian government during the first decades of the occupation except raiding parties. Following independence in 1960, the Somali government set up the WSLF and there was increasing agitation for the Ogaden to secede from Ethiopia. The Ethiopian army immediately moved to set up military bases in the area. Up to 500 civilians were killed when the village of Aisha was destroyed to make way for a military post in August 1960.

In 1963, following the first systematic attempt by the Ethiopian administration to collect taxes, there was widespread insurgency in both lowland Harerghe and Bale. The guerrillas relied heavily on the Somali government for support, and while they grew in numbers to about 3,000, they never posed a serious military threat to the central government. Their guerrilla tactics were unsophisticated and the army was able to engage and disperse them on several occasions. The Ethiopian government also put pressure on Somalia by incursions into Somali territory and threats of a larger-scale invasion. Following government military offensives in late 1963 and an agreement between the Somali and Ethiopian governments in March 1964, the insurrection was largely over.

More serious for the civilian population of the area was the government's policy of mounting punitive expeditions, which killed or confiscated large numbers of animals, depriving the pastoral communities of the basis for their survival.

Military administration remained in the Ogaden after the insurrection. Most major towns had curfews for at least a year. Ogaden clan leaders documented a number of incidents in May 1964, when 75 people were reported killed by the army, together with more than 14,000 domestic animals killed or confiscated, and July 1964, when 22 people were killed and over 8,000 animals killed or confiscated.¹² This "economic war" against the Ogaden was supplemented by a policy of encouraging Amhara farmers to settle in the more fertile areas, especially in the Jijiga area. The process of land registration became a vehicle for settler farmers claiming land rights, depriving pastoralists of use rights.¹³ The lack of access to these pastures became critical when drought struck in 1973-4.

¹² Ismail Wais, "An Account of the Colonial Experience of the Western Somalis," *Horn of Africa*, 4.4, (1981/2), p. 28.

¹³ Noel J. Cossins, "Pastoralism under Pressure: A Study of the Somali Clans in the Jijiga Area of Ethiopia," Addis Ababa, Livestock and Meat Board, 1971, p. 82.

The introduction of administration also led to attempts to regulate the livestock trade. Selling animals is critical to survival for the Ogadeni pastoralists. Hitherto, most Ogadeni animals had been sold to Hargeisa and Berbera in Somalia, along an age-old trade route which was now technically regarded as "smuggling." The new administration confiscated many "smuggled" animals. Together with the harassment of herders attempting to sell animals in Ethiopian towns, this acted as a powerful obstacle to trade, leading directly to the impoverishment of the herders.

A final and key element to the pacification campaign in the Ogaden was the government control of water points. A network of functioning wells is crucial to the mobility which herders need in order to seek out seasonal pastures. There are many reports of the wells dug by the Ogaden people themselves being poisoned. New reservoirs (*birkas*) were built by the government, but primarily to serve the interests of settler farmers and townspeople.

In 1967 there were further military actions, chiefly in lowland Bale, aimed at WSLF groups which were acting in concert with Wako Gutu, and their civilian supporters.

In 1969 Maj.-Gen. Siad Barre seized power in a military coup in Somalia. He acted fast to consolidate his power, and one of his actions was placating the Ethiopian government by formally disbanding the WSLF – though not renouncing Somalia's longstanding claim to the Ogaden.

During 1971–2 there was another round of atrocities by the army against Issa and Ogadeni pastoralists. The conflict was based upon two factors. One was Issa–Afar competition for political control of Djibouti, which was moving towards independence from France. The Issa, who are the majority in Djibouti, were in favor of immediate independence; the minority Afar, supported by Haile Selassie and favored by France, wanted independence postponed. The second factor was drought. Conflict was sparked by occupation of a series of important wells around Barreti by the neighboring Afar in the late 1960s. When there was poor rainfall in 1971 and 1972, the Issa tried to reoccupy the wells, there were armed clashes between the two groups.

On the pretext of the dispute over the wells, the Ethiopian army intervened against the Issa. According to a letter of complaint written by the chiefs of the region to the Ethiopian parliament, between April 1971 and May 1972, the army killed 794 people, as well as confiscating nearly 200,000 head of livestock.¹⁴

¹⁴ Quoted in: Wais, 1981/2, pp. 25–8.

In 1974, drought added to the Ogadenis' problems, and the area was struck by famine. The loss of pastures to immigrant farmers, restrictions on movement, and continued armed clashes with the Afar all contributed to the famine.

According to a survey done in Hararghe in May-June 1974, death rates among the lowland pastoralists were about three times normal.¹⁵ Assuming "normal" to be 20 per thousand, and the affected population to be 700,000, this implies 28,000 famine deaths over the previous year. Another survey done a year later found that death rates had risen slightly, implying a similar number of famine deaths in 1974/5.¹⁶

Responding to the famine became one of the first tasks of the newly constituted Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC), which became active in delivering large quantities of food relief and setting up feeding centers.

The RRC's activities during 1974-5 had a large humanitarian component. However, whether through an ethnocentric view of the superiority of a settled over a nomadic lifestyle, or through a deliberate policy of using the drought as an opportunity to extend government control over the recalcitrant population, the famine relief program served to undermine key aspects of the Ogadeni way of life.

By early 1975, more than 80,000 Ogadenis were living in 18 relief shelters. The shelters were run on military lines, with strict curfews enforced at 8.00 p.m. Movement in and out was severely restricted -- making it impossible for each family to keep more than a handful of small animals. Traditional festivities were reportedly banned in some camps. The government had the explicit intention of turning the camp populations into settled farmers, rather than allowing them to return to a pastoral way of life. Another intention was to relocate camps well away from the Somali border.

As a result of these restrictions, the great majority of the Ogadeni men stayed outside the camps, moving with their animals, unwilling to risk approaching their families within the camps. Fear that the Ethiopian government was intent on undermining their traditional way of life was

¹⁵ John Seaman, Julius Holt and John Rivers, "Hararghe under Drought: A Survey of the Effects of Drought upon Human Nutrition in Hararghe Province, Ethiopia," Addis Ababa, RRC, 1974, pp. 39-41.

¹⁶ M. Gebre Medhin, R. Hay, Y. Licke and M. Maffi, "Initial Experience of a Consolidated Food and Nutrition System: Analysis of Data from the Ogaden Area," *Journal of Tropical Paediatrics and Environmental Child Health*, Monograph No. 48, 1977, pp. 33-4.

one factor that spurred many Ogadeni men into armed opposition to the government.

The Secret Invasion: March 1976–May 1977

After the revolution, Ethiopia was in turmoil, and its army was bogged down in the war in Eritrea and fighting insurgencies in several provinces. The Somali government had meanwhile greatly expanded its armed forces, with Soviet support, so that in certain areas -- such as artillery, tanks and mobile battalions -- they outnumbered the Ethiopian army, and in most other areas they matched them. There was, however, political discontent in Somalia, as President Siad Barre's authoritarian rule was antagonizing certain groups. Although President Siad had pledged to abolish "tribalism", he came to rely more and more on support from certain clans. At the beginning of 1976, President Siad turned to the elders of the Ogaden clan for a political alliance, and concluded a deal whereby the government would provide support for the cause of the "liberation" of the Ogaden from Ethiopia, including military assistance, in return for political loyalty to the regime. It is important to note that the deal was struck with representatives of the Ogaden *clan*, not representatives of the population of the Ogaden, which includes many clans. The WSLF was re-founded, and members of the Ogaden began to receive preferential treatment in matters such as government and army posts and education.

In the first months of 1976, the WSLF became active once again inside the Ethiopian Ogaden. With a leadership based in Mogadishu and close to President Siad, it drew recruits from the frustrated and alienated pastoralists. Its main base was Hargeisa, infiltrating through the Haud reserve area into Ethiopia to make guerrilla raids. The Somali media trumpeted its successes, but the claims made were out of all proportion to the reality: in fact, the guerrillas were making little real military headway.

Officers in the Somali army became impatient with the slow progress of the WSLF, and argued that if the Somali government's stated intention to annex the Ogaden was genuine, it would be necessary to use the regular army. In early 1977, President Siad responded to these complaints with a compromise: soldiers from the regular army would henceforth fight with the WSLF. About one fifth of the Somali army, numbering about 3,000 men and consisting mainly but not entirely of members of the Ogaden clan, was deputed to become the principal force of the WSLF. The soldiers took off their uniforms and put on the ragged clothes of guerrillas; they

abandoned their armor and heavy weapons for light guns and hand grenades.¹⁷

Under the command of senior military officers, the "army" units of the WSLF engaged in attacks on Ethiopian military positions, while the pre-existing "guerrilla" units of the WSLF undertook activities such as ambushes, sabotage and laying land mines. The plan did not succeed. The soldiers were not trained for guerrilla warfare, and the officers did not like a method of warfare which conflicted with their conventional training. When an attack on an Ethiopian garrison at Gode (southern Ogaden) in May 1977 was repulsed with the loss of over 300 dead, including 14 middle- and high-ranking officers, dissent in the army became vocal. In June the decision was made to commit the Somali army, in uniform and with full armor and support, to the Ogaden.

The Regular Invasion, July 1977–March 1978

On July 23, 1977, the Somali army invaded the Ogaden. The Somali government still refused to declare war and insisted in the media that all military actions were the responsibility of the WSLF, but the truth was evident.

The first assault was made in the central-southern Ogaden, and Gode and Gabridaharey fell to the invaders within a week. Half of the Ethiopian Third Division was put out of action, and the Somali force moved rapidly north. This was followed by an invasion from the vicinity of Hargeisa directed towards Dire Dawa; the attack on the town started on August 10. Three attempts to take the town failed within two weeks, and instead the Somali army turned its attention to Jijiga, which was evacuated by the Ethiopian army on September 10. The Somali army then concentrated on attacking Harer, advancing from Jijiga in October. A brigade that was originally directed to the south of Harer in a diversionary move actually succeeded in occupying a section of the town for several days in November before being pushed back. Harer was besieged for two months.

WSLF units engaged in sabotage action, impairing the mobility of the Ethiopian forces by destroying communications.

The conventional fighting was confined to the north. In the southern Ogaden, the Ethiopian garrison at Dolo (near the Ethiopia-Somalia-Kenya triangle) withdrew to northern Sidamo, and three Somali brigades crossed into Ethiopia, encountering no resistance. The invading force stopped short

¹⁷ The following account of the Somali invasion and abuses associated with it draws heavily on material provided by Abdi Razaq "Aqli" Ahmed, formerly a Major in the Somali army.

of Negele (southeast Sidamo) when two of the brigades were re-assigned to the northern front, and this area remained quiet. In Bale, the SALF was active on a small scale, and there was no conventional military action. A single battalion was assigned to El Kere, and then moved to Fiiq in central Harerghe, meeting no resistance on the way.

In late December, the USSR responded to repeated appeals from the Ethiopian government and switched sides. It airlifted several billion dollars worth of military equipment to the embattled Dergue, including over 600 battle tanks and 67 MiG fighter-bomber airplanes.¹⁸ Approximately 16,000 Cuban combat troops were also flown to Ethiopia together with modern armor. The government had earlier launched a program of mass mobilization, and was expanding the army from 60,000 regulars and 75,000 militia to 75,000 regulars and 150,000 militia. This led to a dramatic change in the make-up of the Ethiopian army. Its firepower and mobility became immediately greater than those of the Somali army. It was now advised by the same Soviet strategists who had trained the Somalis.

In late January, the Ethiopian counter-offensive began, directed by Soviet advisors and spearheaded by Cuban troops. The Somali army was pushed back from Dire Dawa and Harer and outflanked by mobile and airborne units. Counter-attacks were repulsed, and dissent within the Somali army escalated. In early March the Somali command gave the order to retreat, and the Ogaden was evacuated and reoccupied by the Ethiopian army without a fight.

Abuses by the Somali Army

The Somali army was regularly violent and abusive to the inhabitants of the areas it occupied. Its treatment of Oromo civilians was markedly worse than ethnic Somalis -- many of the troops came from the same clans as the local Somalis, and therefore treated them with more respect, not least because clan loyalty demands vengeance on those who commit an offense against a clan member.

The pattern of abuses consisted mostly of small groups of soldiers committing the following types of violations:

- * Soldiers destroying or looting property, and on occasion killing the owners who protested.

¹⁸ NOVIB, "War and Famine in Ethiopia and Eritrea, An Investigation into the Arms Deliveries to the Struggling Parties in Eritrea and Tigray," Zeist, The Netherlands, 1991.

- * Soldiers raping women, and killing brothers, husbands or fathers who objected.
- * Soldiers taking food or livestock to eat, and sometimes killing the owners who objected.
- * Soldiers opening fire on civilians who returned to investigate the condition of their houses or farms which had been occupied by soldiers.

The extent of these abuses and whether the soldiers responsible were held accountable and punished depended entirely on the local commander.

On several occasions there were larger-scale violations which had been authorized by senior officers. These included the mining of buildings in Jijiga and other towns during the retreat in February–March 1978. In addition, in November 1977, the commander of the force which had occupied part of Harer town was instructed by a senior officer to destroy as much of the town as he could before retreating. Harer is a holy city to Moslems and the local commander, as a devout Moslem, refused to carry out the order.

Attacks by the Somali air force in late July resulted in civilian casualties at Aware and Degahabur. In mid August the Ethiopian government reported that a Somali air attack on the airfield at Jijiga had only narrowly avoided causing a large number of civilian casualties because an airplane on the ground had been evacuated just minutes beforehand.

There were also violations of the rights of combatants by members of the Somali army and WSLF. These included:

- * Summary execution of officers and men in order to maintain discipline. In February 1978, the commander of the Jijiga front requested each battalion commander to send him twelve soldiers, implying that they would be considered for promotion or another form of award or benefit. All of them -- numbering about 80 -- were summarily shot. The commander explained that his junior officers had been insubordinate, and that in future all who disputed his orders would be similarly dealt with. In January, five middle-ranking officers were shot separately in suspicious circumstances.
- * Retreating Ethiopian soldiers were set upon by WSLF fighters and armed WSLF sympathizers and killed.
- * Abuses against prisoners of war (see chapter 17).

Abuses by the Ethiopian Army

The Ethiopian army was also responsible for abuses against the civilian population during the war. Before abandoning the towns of Jijiga, Degahabur, Aware and Gabridaharey the army summarily executed civilians. In the case of Jijiga, nearly 100 were reported killed.

Individual acts of violence by Ethiopian soldiers against civilians have been reported. A serious instance of an abuse used as part of a military tactic occurred just south of Harer in late December, when the Ethiopian troops forced a line of ethnic Somali women to walk in front of their advancing soldiers, using them as a human shield. The Somali soldiers were faced with the alternatives of retreating under fire or opening fire themselves -- they chose the latter, and about 20 women were killed.

The worst and most systematic abuses by the Ethiopian army occurred during the reoccupation of the Ogaden in March 1978. Journalist Norman Kirkham described how the Ethiopian and Cuban troops swept through the Ogaden after the retreating Somali army, virtually unopposed:

I met numbers of the survivors who told me that civilians had been shot in the streets or had been executed summarily in house to house sweeps. Sometimes whole crowds were machine-gunned; villages were burned to the ground.

Some of the worst incidents followed the fierce battles for the town of Jijiga where thousands of refugees had fled. One of them, Hassan Khaireh Wabari, a 31 year old merchant, told me "Artillery, bombing and tank fire devastated many of the buildings before the Cubans and Ethiopians moved in at daybreak. Sick people and others trying to protect their homes were shot, and later I saw people being rounded up and executed with machine guns. At first the women were saved so that they could be raped. Then they were killed."

Sheikh Ali Nur, a Koranic teacher from Fiiq, near Harer, said that he had walked many miles to tell me of similar attacks in his area. "They shelled and bombed us. Then they shot the men, raped the women, and destroyed the houses. I know that about 130 were exterminated in my village and about 800 more died in the same district. Even the animals were shot."¹⁹

¹⁹ *Sunday Telegraph*, London, April 8, 1979.

Kirkham reported that neither side in the conflict gave quarter or took prisoners. One of the major abuses he witnessed was indiscriminate bombing of civilian targets, which had forced thousands of people to abandon towns and villages and set up temporary grass shelters concealed in the bush.

We travelled for 120 miles to the bombed out areas of Malako, a ghost town deserted after bitter fighting last year, and to Garbo, where the people had scattered into the nearby hills after an air raid had wiped out their village a few weeks earlier. We walked across an acre of charred ruins and ashes and I was shown cannon cartridges and a three-foot rocket container as the villagers described what had happened.

The attack had begun at breakfast time when an American F-5 jet of the Ethiopian air force suddenly swept out of the sky, roaring low over the huts. The pilot climbed again swiftly without firing and the people sighed with relief, but too soon. Slowly, the green-and-brown camouflaged jet turned and began to descend again, this time followed by a MiG-21 loaded with napalm. The F-5 made four runs, spraying American cannon shells and rockets, while the MiG dived on the four corners of the village, dropping its deadly napalm in a neat rectangle.

Within ten minutes, Garbo had been turned into an inferno. The people ran for their lives but in spite of the preliminary warning pass by the F-5, more than 90 died in the flames or were killed by the strafing. Others were hideously burned and are being treated in a hospital across the border in Somalia.²⁰

Following the counter-offensive, 500,000 people were internally displaced within Ethiopia, and refugees streamed into Somalia.

²⁰ *Sunday Telegraph*, London, April 8, 1979.

5. THE SECRET WARS TO CRUSH THE SOUTHEAST, 1978-84

For most rural people in Hareрге, Bale and parts of Sidamo, the end of the "official" Ogaden war did not represent the end of suffering and human rights abuse -- rather, the end of the beginning.

The Ethiopia-Somalia war had profound consequences. Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam was immeasurably strengthened -- he gained both prestige and a vast new armory. He benefitted from a surge of nationalist feeling in Ethiopia and also from international condemnation of Somalia's aggression. President Siad Barre was humiliated, and processes of political decay and fragmentation in Somalia were greatly accelerated.

The Somali army was gone, but internal conditions in southeast Ethiopia had not improved, and the Oromo and Ogadeni insurgencies continued. Large-scale human rights abuses by the Ethiopian army against the local population increased. Six years of secret wars, that were both more widespread and more bloody than the official war, were to end in the defeat of the insurgents, and the creation of widespread famine conditions. Many of the inhabitants fled to Somalia, where the refugees became pawns in another political struggle that was slowly degenerating into civil war, and where hunger and human rights abuse were common.

In early 1978 the Ethiopian government had acquired a new arsenal from the USSR and had built a greatly expanded army, spearheaded by Cuban combat troops. Though established to combat a conventional invasion, that force was now to be used for counter-insurgency only. The government could now contemplate crushing an insurgency by brute force alone.

The victory of the Ethiopian government was aided by dissension among its adversaries. The WSLF was very strong in mid-1978. However, it continued to be subject to manipulation by President Siad Barre, who used it to bolster his position in domestic Somali politics, especially after discontented army officers staged an abortive coup in 1978. This led to disillusion among the WSLF's erstwhile supporters, and resistance to it from other Somali groups, notably members of the Isaaq clan.

In Ethiopia, a series of events in 1977-8 conspired to increase popular support for the OLF. These included the purge of MEISON, which brought an end to hopes of a negotiated compromise with the government, the purge of the Peasant Association (PA) leadership, government declarations of intent to collectivize agriculture, the resettlement of Amhara farmers in Oromo areas, the enforced use of the Amharic alphabet in the literacy

campaign, and the brutality of the 1978 counter-offensive by the army.¹ Militarily, however, the OLF was in a weaker position due to the huge build up of the army in Harerghe. The "liberated area" in the Chercher highlands had to be largely abandoned in 1978-9. Tactics changed towards a more classic guerrilla campaign. In 1981, the OLF also started to open a new front in western Ethiopia, in Wollega.

The OLF also gained from the decline of the SALF, which was closely associated with the Somali government. Many Oromos had been antagonized by the evident ambitions of Siad Barre to annex Oromo areas and the abuses committed by the Somali army when occupying these areas. Much of the leadership of the SALF joined the OLF in August 1980, following large-scale rank and file defections. The SALF suffered further defections to the newly-founded Oromo Islamic Front (also Somali-backed), but maintained a small operational presence throughout the 1980s. Another group, the Sidama Liberation Front, was formed in 1978 and was active up until 1984.

The OLF remained suspicious of the Somali government, and hence the WSLF, SALF and Oromo Islamic Front, and there was no cooperation between the different insurgent groups.

Counter-Insurgency after the Somali Defeat

The Ethiopian army occupied the Ogaden for only a brief period after defeating the Somali army. Six months later, rebel attacks were increasing in frequency. Within a year, the WSLF was back in control of most of the countryside, and the army was confined to the towns, the main roads, and the air. According to journalist William Campbell, 90 per cent of the lowlands were in rebel hands.² The OLF was also able to operate freely in much of the highlands, and held its first congress at Bookhee in the Chercher highlands of Harerghe in April 1978.

Conventional battlefield tactics met with limited success against the WSLF and the OLF. Sweeps and patrols throughout 1979 in the lowlands temporarily reduced the insurgent activity, but failed to engage most of the rebel forces, and became instead more akin to punitive expeditions, attacking villages and herds, and forcing another wave of refugees to flee to Somalia.

¹ *Africa Confidential*, 25.15, July 18, 1984, p. 1.

² *The Guardian*, London, March 7, 1979.

An Ogadeni woman later recalled some of the violence that occurred when she was driven from her home:

One morning, before sunrise, in July [1979], a woman in my quarters who was on the road, heard over her ears the noisy click-clang of a heavy convoy from a long distance, but marching full-speed towards our home. Running back home, frightened and crying out, she signalled us: "Wake up! Wake up! They are Abyssinian."

Most of us came out of the house. Unfortunately we found ourselves surrounded by armed soldiers who immediately began to shower bullets on us before we had a chance of driving our livestock out of the pens.

Most of us were unable to escape together in family groupings. I remember that my husband and two sons jumped out of the hut together, but immediately rushed in different directions.

After running for a few minutes I saw with my own eyes my nine-years' old son caught by an Abyssinian soldier who mercilessly grasped him by the hair and smashed him to the ground. The young boy was crying out for mercy, saying: "Oh! Mamma! Pappa!" and sometimes calling to the soldier: "Uncle, don't kill me, I am young!" While he was on the ground at the feet of the soldier asking for clemency, a second soldier standing by jumped out and bayoneted the boy with a push-and-twist in the stomach several times so he was dead.³

The village was burned in the attack, and nine people killed: a mother and her newly-delivered baby, four other children, an older girl and an old blind man. As the group fled towards Somalia, they were again intercepted by soldiers and two children were killed. A baby also died of hunger.

In late 1979, the government changed its counter-insurgency strategy. It adopted a four-pronged approach, consisting of:

- (1) The forcible displacement of much of the population into shelters and protected villages;

³ *Somali, Tigray and Oromo Resistance Monitor (STORM)*, 2.3, September 1982, pp. 2-3.

- (2) Military offensives which attacked all people and economic assets remaining outside the shelters and protected villages;
- (3) Sponsoring insurgent groups against the WSLF and the Somali government; and
- (3) Attempts to promote the repatriation of refugees.

The counter-insurgency campaigns of 1979-84 were largely successful in their aim, though small-scale armed resistance was never entirely eliminated. However, this "success" was gained at the cost of much suffering by non-combatant civilians, and the reduction of much of the population to a state of famine.

Numbers Affected

In mid-1978, when the "official" war was over, there were an estimated 500,000 displaced persons. There were almost 200,000 in RRC shelters in Harerghe, 66,000 in Bale, and 20,000 in Sidamo.⁴ By October, the number "cared for" by the RRC in Bale had risen to 350,000; by 1979 it was 586,000. There were an additional 230,000 in Sidamo. Bale and Sidamo had been scarcely affected by the Somali army. In 1980, the RRC claimed that one million people in Harerghe were affected by drought and war.

By 1981, the number of "war affected" people who had been relocated in villages amounted to 880,000 in Bale alone, including 750,000 in the northern part of the province, where the Somali army had never reached. A further 1.5 million were living in relief shelters.

Meanwhile, refugees streamed across the international border into Somalia. In mid-1978 there were 80,000-85,000 in camps in Somalia. A year later there were 220,000; by the end of 1979 between 440,000-470,000; and by the end of 1980 about 800,000. By 1983, the Somali government was claiming a total of 1.3 million refugees, though this number was hotly disputed by the aid donors, who argued that the true number was perhaps 700,000-800,000. Many of the refugees were not ethnic Somali but Oromo.

⁴ RRC, *The Challenges of Drought: Ethiopia's Decade of Struggle in Relief and Rehabilitation*, Addis Ababa, 1985, p. 135.

The war had left 600,000 displaced and refugees at the time of its "official" conclusion in March 1978. After three years of "peace," the affected population had risen by more than five times.

The fact is that the great majority of the war affected population of southeast Ethiopia from late 1979 onwards was affected not by the fighting between the Somali and Ethiopian armies in 1977/8, but by the counter-insurgency strategy of the Ethiopian government which was implemented from December 1979 onwards. Many of the people were affected by the military operations of the army, others were affected by forced relocations.

Military Action during 1979-84

Starting in December 1979, the government launched a second military offensive. Soviet advisors and Cuban troops participated. This differed from the counter-offensive of 1978 in that:

- (1) It was more specifically directed against the population's means of survival, including poisoning and bombing water holes and machine gunning herds of cattle; and
- (2) It covered Oromo areas as well as the Ogaden.

At the outset of the 1979/80 offensive, the WSLF was estimated to control 60-70 per cent of the Ogaden.⁵ The OLF controlled large areas of the highlands. The first government offensive lasted several months, followed by a counter-attack by WSLF forces based in Somalia in March 1980, and stepped-up guerrilla action by the OLF. Ethiopian forces then mounted five major attacks between May and July, which coincided with counter-attacks by a joint WSLF-Somali army force.⁶

A new wave of refugees fled to Somalia. Some were interviewed by journalist Victoria Brittain:⁷

I had sixty camels. The Ethiopians waited at the water point and machine-gunned my two eldest sons and all my camels. I brought my six young children out on two donkeys.

⁵ *Africa Contemporary Record*, 1979-80, p. B199.

⁶ *Africa Contemporary Record*, 1980-81, p. B177.

⁷ *The Guardian*, London, May 21, 1980.

The Ethiopians came twice to my farm in Sidamo, once with white men [i.e. Cubans]. They took stores of maize, pulled it from the field, beat everyone in the house. They have taken young men from us to fight in Eritrea. Nobody is left in my area.

In February there was bombing which made fires as far as the eye could see. My camels were burned and many people in our family. With two camels carrying our house I have walked since then

The air force was deployed to attack villages, animal herds and fleeing refugees. Reports indicate that napalm or phosphorous was used frequently. There were also several raids up to 20 miles inside Somalia.

The civilian casualties in the Ogaden alone during the year following the Somali defeat were estimated at 25,000.⁸ Combined with the flight of several hundred thousand refugees to Somalia, this represented an attempt to break the WSLF resistance by brute force. Perhaps half of the Ogadeni population was in Somalia, and half of the remainder in Ethiopian camps and settlements. Diplomats talked of the depopulation of the Ogaden as the "final solution".⁹

The government offensives ranged well beyond the Ogaden, as witnessed by Victoria Brittain's interviewees. There was also much military action in the highlands of Harerghe and in Bale and Sidamo. Many areas which had been affected little or not at all by the war of 1977/8 were devastated by these offensives.

In October 1980, there was fighting in the lowlands of southern Bale. During 1980, the OLF claimed to have engaged the Ethiopian army in 40 major battles, in its operational area of the highlands of Harerghe and Bale.¹⁰ As late as December 1980, journalist Greg Wilesmith was able to travel more than 100 kilometers inside the Ethiopian Ogaden with WSLF forces, and testified that most of the countryside was under rebel administration.¹¹ However, by then the tide had turned; the government counter-insurgency campaign was meeting with success.

⁸ David Lamb, *International Herald Tribune*, May 14, 1980.

⁹ *The Guardian*, London, May 20, 1980.

¹⁰ *Africa Contemporary Record*, 1980-81, p. B178.

¹¹ Greg Wilesmith, *The Observer*, London, December 7, 1980.

In early 1981, fierce fighting continued in Bale and Sidamo, and also in Arba Guuga district of Arsi. The southeast was described as "the most active trouble spot in the country."¹² The Sidama Liberation Front (SLF) was becoming more active, largely in response to pre-emptive government counter-insurgency policies.

The war in Sidamo in 1981 was one of the Dergue's best-kept secrets.¹³ In January, 200 people were reported killed by an army patrol at Godaboke Mito and Chire villages in Sidamo. Between March 19-21, helicopter and airplane attacks at Gata Warrancha in Sidamo caused at least 20,000 people in one valley to flee, and over 1,000 (and possibly more than 2,000) were reported killed when a "wall of flames" was ignited by bombing using either phosphorous or ethylene.¹⁴ Ethylene is a heavier-than-air gas which can be sprayed from the air, whereupon it spreads out, hugging the ground, and can be ignited by an incendiary to create instantaneous combustion over a large area. Its use in this attack has not been confirmed by other independent sources.

The government ordered the evacuation of a Norwegian mission station and hospital, leaving the wounded without medical care. In July, 615 were reported killed at a meeting called by local administrators at Alo. A well-documented killing took place on December 1, 1981, when a defense squad killed at least 48 people, including several entire families.

Throughout the southeast, the army took frequent reprisals against civilians in localities close to where guerrilla attacks had occurred. In one credible reported incident between Shilabo and Warder in the Ogaden in August 1981, houses were burned and 12 villagers were taken hostage and subsequently disappeared.

One aspect of the offensives which had far-reaching implications for Ogadeni society was a government policy of poisoning wells, in order to impoverish nomads and restrict their movements.

Large scale war was effectively over in most of the lowland south east by 1982, though sporadic guerrilla activity continued into the following year. The WSLF was able to make dramatic raids such as storming the

¹² *Africa Contemporary Record*, 1980-81, p. B178.

¹³ Some of the atrocities committed in Sidamo during 1980-2 are documented in *STORM*, 3.1, March 1983. The principal informant, a refugee named Tadesse Barsamo, was later murdered by Ethiopian security forces.

¹⁴ Reuters, April 27, 1981; St Paul Pioneer Press, April 12, 1981, reprinted in: J. W. Clay, S. Steingraber and P. Niggli, *The Spoils of Famine: Ethiopian Famine Policy and Peasant Agriculture*, Cambridge, Mass., 1988, pp. 224-5.

prison in Jijiga on August 12, 1983. In reprisal for that action, the Ethiopian army destroyed the villages of Birgot, Midha and Burey and killed 300 civilians.¹⁵

In the highlands of Sidamo and Harerghe, widespread violence by government forces continued throughout 1982. Killings by defense squads took place in Sidamo in January; on several occasions, the victims were decapitated and their severed heads were displayed in prominent places, to warn their fellow villagers. In a military sweep that began on November 26 and lasted into January 1983 (i.e. during harvest time), the army made numerous attacks on villages accompanied by the burning of crops and confiscation of livestock. Villagers who could not escape were killed. The survivors languished in relief shelters, suffering disease, malnutrition and high death rates, or tried to flee to Somalia -- though some columns of would-be refugees were reportedly intercepted and the detainees imprisoned or killed.

On April 1, 1983, in a government reprisal for SLF activities during the previous two months, soldiers killed 100 civilians in the village of Halile, Sidamo.¹⁶ In 1984, the government was able to recapture most of the areas previously held by the SLF, and forcibly relocated the population in relief shelters. In Chire camp 3,000 people died, mainly children, before relief agencies were allowed to provide services in 1984.

The war in the highlands of Harerghe continued in 1984, leading to the forcible implementation of a large-scale villagization program (see chapter 13, below).

The war in the southeast was largely a secret war, especially after the WSLF ceased to take journalists into the area after mid-1980, on account of lack of control of rural areas and pressure exerted on Somalia by the Ethiopian government. The incidents referred to above are but a few details from a much larger story of routine brutality and indiscriminate killing of civilians by the army. The figures for the numbers of people displaced by the war also indicate the scale of human suffering inflicted.

Population Displacement in Counter-Insurgency

A major part of the counter-insurgency strategy adopted by the government in the southeast was the forcible relocation of the population into protected villages, where their movements could be controlled, and

¹⁵ *Africa Contemporary Record*, 1983-84, p. B139.

¹⁶ *Africa Contemporary Record*, 1982-83, p. B152.

whereby the guerrillas could be denied access to essential supplies. This program was implemented in Bale between 1979 and 1982, where almost the entire population was villagized during this period. There was also widespread villagization in certain areas of Sidamo. More than two million people were forcibly relocated during the period 1978-82. In Harerghie, universal villagization began in October 1984, coinciding with intensified military activity against the OLF.¹⁷

The security aspect to the villagization program was officially recognized from the start, while the OLF opposed villagization because it saw it as an instrument of government control. Teshale Tessema, of Addis Ababa University, basing his information on the guidelines of the Central Villagization Coordinating Committee, wrote:

the villagization is a direct blow at them [the OLF], by depriving them of any base from which they could carry out their banditry and anti-revolutionary activities. Thus the efforts of these groups ranged from counter-agitation to the burning of houses in new villages ... As some bandits who submitted said: "the villagization is the highest artillery blow directed [against the] bandits. With this launching the possibility of obtaining fresh food by bandits is over."¹⁸

The government drew up ambitious plans for villagization in the south east. By 1979, nearly 560,000 people had been villagized in northern Bale. Two years later, this had risen to 750,000 in 280 villages. Villagization proceeded more slowly in southern Bale -- the program to villagize 130,000 semi-nomads got under way only in 1981, and was completed in 1984.¹⁹ (Southern Bale was affected by the war of 1977/8, northern Bale was not -- but the latter was the locus of SALF and OLF activity). In Sidamo, 40,000 were villagized in 1979, and a further 190,000 gathered

¹⁷ At the time, the program was generally called "resettlement," but in this report that term is used exclusively to refer to the movement and settlement of people from the northern regions in the south.

¹⁸ Quoted in Survival International, *For their Own Good ... Ethiopia's Villagization Programme*, London, 1988, p. 19.

¹⁹ UN Coordinating Committee for Relief and Rehabilitation and RRC of Ethiopia, "Short-term Relief and Rehabilitation Needs in Ethiopia," March 1981, p. 13.

in shelters.²⁰ Following the fighting in Arba Guuga district of Arsi, villagization was implemented there in 1982. Plans were floated to villagize a further 2.4 million.

Commonly, the government would instruct people to relocate at a certain place within a certain time. If the people remained behind, punitive measures would be used. Sometimes, no warning would be given, and existing villages and homesteads were simply destroyed.

The following testimony of an Oromo refugee who had been subjected to villagization is one of the very few pieces of direct evidence that is available about the human impact of the program:

The army came and started burning everything. We ran into the forest with nothing. Some soldiers came and some men in white trucks, and they told us to go back to our village and get the others. Then they took us to a place far from our homes and told us to make houses.

They gave us food every day, but there was never enough to save some. We worked five kilometers from our homes, but if we complained, they beat us. Also we didn't have any doctors and only dirty water, but we couldn't say anything. They told us the Somalis did it to us, but I knew it was them. They kept saying it though, and they told us they were helping us. Every time we harvested our crops, we had to give them to the government, and they gave us our rations.

I knew it was them who burned us because they screamed at us and called us names. They even said they hated us. They had men with guns around all of the walls -- you couldn't move outside. If your brother died in the next village, you couldn't go to bury him. Just work, they said.²¹

A particularly insidious element in the government's policy of relocation was its repeated attempts to obtain finance from the international community to carry it out. These attempts were partly successful -- had they been more so, doubtless villagization would have proceeded more quickly in Harerghe and Sidamo.

In the aftermath of the official war of 1977/8, it was not difficult for Ethiopia to obtain assistance to assist the local population and repair some

²⁰ RRC, 1985, pp. 136-7.

²¹ Quoted in *Horn of Africa*, "Refugees in the Horn", 4.1, (1981), p. 39.

of the damaged infrastructure in Harerghe. Somalia had been the aggressor in the war, which had led directly to an estimated \$1 billion in damage. Later on, however, the government was not eager to draw attention to the ongoing war. Displaced people were blamed in vague terms on the war of 1977/8, and on drought.

In June 1980, the Ethiopian government started appealing for relief aid for the "victims of drought." Officials from the RRC claimed that Harerghe, Bale and Sidamo as well as the northern provinces were stricken by an eight-month drought.²² A reconnaissance team from the RRC had visited Harerghe in February-March 1980, but delayed releasing its findings for three months. The published findings indicated an urgent humanitarian disaster -- poor rains had affected one million people out of a population of three million, mostly in lowlands. The report goes on to say that this was made worse by the destruction of water facilities in the war of 1977/8 -- it claims that pumping machines had been taken away by Somalis, and 40 supply points destroyed. Destruction of infrastructure and wells by the Ethiopian army is not mentioned.²³

Several facts about the June 1980 appeal are odd. One is the claim that a drought of eight months had caused a major humanitarian disaster. Such a drought indicates merely the failure of one of the two annual rainy seasons in the area -- a common occurrence and an indicator of hardship, but no cause for serious alarm. Moreover, the RRC team had visited the area *before* that rainy season was fully under way -- so the distress it found could not be blamed on the alleged drought. The three month delay in releasing the findings is itself suspicious, especially in view of the urgency with which the matter was presented to the western donors. Recalling the timing of the military operations in the area (i.e. the launch of the principal counter-insurgency campaign in December 1979), the findings of the reconnaissance team are less surprising, as is the delay in publication until the security of the area was more assured some time later.

In May/June 1980 a UN team visited Ethiopia and travelled to some accessible areas of the southeast. The team recommended "the government's

²² In the lowlands of southeast Ethiopia there are two dry seasons (December to March and May to September) and two wet seasons (April-May and October-November).

²³ RRC, Early Warning and Planning Service, "Report on a Reconnaissance Trip in Harerghe Administrative Region," June 1980.

resettlement [i.e. villagization] should be given all possible support."²⁴ The team recommended that 183,000 metric tonnes (MT) of food plus transport be donated to the RRC. 158,000 MT plus transport were actually pledged, including \$8.1 million from UNHCR.

The rationale for the mission's recommendation was in part that much of the population had lost its economic assets and was collecting in relief shelters. Unable to return to an economically active life without assistance, the population could be better helped by social engineering in government villages.

Following the RRC appeal in June, a second UN mission visited Ethiopia from July 6-15, 1980. After consulting with the government, this mission made the much stronger recommendation that 812,000 MT of food be pledged, and the funds be provided direct to the RRC for "internal handling."

If, as the government claimed, drought was now the main problem, the end of the year saw a return to normal. The main summer rains in 1980 were good. In November 1980, the RRC reported that the food supply situation in Bale, Harerghe and Sidamo was "normal."²⁵ This did not, however, stop an increasing flow of demands for international assistance for victims of drought and war, and for villagization.

In early 1981, a mission from the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) visited the southeast as guests of the RRC. Though not as uncritical as the preceding UN missions, the ICVA team did recommend support for the villagization program. The team noted "tight security dispositions prevailing" in the villages it visited,²⁶ but did not question the official explanation that this was to protect the inhabitants from "bandits." Others believe that the military presence was to keep the population under tight control.²⁷

The Ethiopian government failed to obtain all the assistance it asked for. However, it obtained enough to relocate almost the entire population

²⁴ UN Coordinating Committee for Relief and Rehabilitation and RRC of Ethiopia, "Short Term Relief and Rehabilitation Needs in Ethiopia," March 1981, p. 5.

²⁵ RRC, Early Warning and Planning Service, "Food Supply Status and Forecast by Administrative Region," November 1980.

²⁶ ICVA, "ICVA Mission to Assess the Situation with Regard to Displaced Persons and Returnees, January 16-30, 1982," Geneva, 1982, p. 2.

²⁷ *STORM*, 2.3, September 1982, pp. 9-12.

of Bale, plus substantial numbers of people in Sidamo and lowland Harerghe, and some in Arsi. UNHCR assistance rose from \$100,000 in 1979 to \$2.7 million in 1980 and \$7.3 million in 1981; UN Development Program assistance also rose. In early 1981, the Babile shelter was established near Harer for "drought-affected" Hawiye nomads. Later in the year, the Bisidimo scheme, resettling nomads for agricultural work was set up. Voluntary agencies such as Lutheran World Federation supported some projects. The ironies of humanitarian agencies working within a counter-insurgency framework were not evident to the staff: one report noted a large number of widows in the villages, explaining that "the husbands have been killed or got lost during the Somali invasion."²⁸

Despite the emphasis on drought given by the RRC and repeated UN missions, all the refugees interviewed by Victoria Brittain in Somalia in May 1980 -- a month before the RRC's major drought appeal -- denied that drought was the reason for their flight. Instead they mentioned violence and destruction by the Ethiopian army.

A second element in the relocation strategy was a series of attempts to obtain the return of refugees from Somalia. That will be discussed below.

A final element in the population displacement strategy was the introduction of settler populations from the north, in a small-scale forerunner to the resettlement program that was to attract much attention in the later 1980s. The resettlers took land from the locals, who were thereby displaced.

Two settlements were set up in Bale in 1979: Melka Oda and Harawa. Harawa was highly mechanized, and was planned to have a capacity of 7,000 families. "The Amharas have given our land to others" complained refugees in Somalia.²⁹ Many settlers were given military training and arms.

The use of relocation as a counter-insurgency measure is common. Under international humanitarian law it is legitimate only if required by the security needs of those to be relocated or by imperative military necessity, if the government provides the relocated population with sufficient resources to attain a reasonable standard of living, and if the relocation avoids unnecessary suffering. Aside from the violations of international law, the relocation policy followed in southeast Ethiopia was objectionable on several grounds. One is that it was achieved through indiscriminate

²⁸ Quoted in: Jason W. Clay, "The Case of Bale," in Clay *et al*, 1988, p. 148.

²⁹ Victoria Brittain, *The Guardian*, London, May 21, 1980.

violence in areas of the countryside not controlled by the government and the threat of such violence. A second is that it was achieved by hunger – people were obliged to congregate in relief shelters because of the destruction of the basis for their way of life. A third is that, while assistance was provided to the people in shelters and government villages, this assistance was obtained under false pretenses from the international community. Fortunately the mass human rights abuses that would almost certainly have followed the large-scale refolement of refugees in Somalia did not occur (see below).

Sponsoring Insurgents against the Somali Government and WSLF

The Ethiopian government brought strong pressure on the Somali government to withdraw assistance to the rebel groups. The pressure included direct attacks into Somalia, usually by aircraft, notably in 1982, and sponsoring rebel Somali groups.

The SSDF

In May 1978, immediately after defeat in the Ogaden, officers of the Somali army staged a bloody but unsuccessful coup attempt. The surviving coup leaders, most of whom were members of the Majerteen clan, fled and founded the Somali Salvation Front. This soon amalgamated with two other organizations to form the Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF), which gained support from the Ethiopian government. Though the SSDF initially had a large armed force it failed to have a significant military impact. Its major military success was a joint operation with the Ethiopian army to capture the two Somali villages of Balambale and Galgudud in 1983. The leadership was divided and many fighters deserted back to the Somali government. The SSDF came into conflict with the Ethiopian government, reportedly for refusing to mount military operations against the WSLF. In 1982, the Ethiopian government confiscated armored vehicles belonging to the SSDF. In 1985, after a spate of assassinations within the SSDF, Ethiopian security forces detained the SSDF leader Col. Abdullahi Yusuf and 12 others. One of them, Abdullahi Mohamed "Fash" died in custody in 1986.

In Somalia, one of the consequences of the attempted coup was that President Siad Barre purged the army, promoting his kinsmen from the Marehan clan, and also bringing members of the Ogaden clan into more powerful positions. This led to political conflict between the Ogaden clan and other Somali clans and opposition movements.

The SNM

In 1981, the Mengistu government began to support the Somali National Movement (SNM). The resulting war by the SNM against the WSLF was an important element in the Ethiopian strategy, and it was resoundingly successful.

The formation of the SNM was the outcome of systematic discrimination and human rights abuse against members of the Isaaq clan, which predominates in northern Somalia, by the Siad Barre government.³⁰

Many abuses against the civilian population of northern Somalia, especially those living in the border area, were committed by the WSLF. Killing, looting and rape were common from 1978 onwards. In late 1978, Isaaq elders petitioned President Siad to form an Isaaq wing of the WSLF, which would be able to protect local civilians. This organization, known as *Afraad*, the "fourth unit," became operational in 1979. It immediately came into armed conflict with the main (Ogaden clan) forces of the WSLF. Shortly afterwards, an Isaaq army officer arrested 14 leading WSLF fighters at Gobyar who had been harassing and abusing the local population; they were taken to Gebiley and executed. The army command in Hargeisa was then transferred to General Gani, a Marehan and a clansman of the president; one of the changes that followed was the forcible transfer of the *Afraad* away from the border zone. However, many members of the *Afraad* became guerrilla fighters in their own right and continued the inter-clan conflict, which intensified in 1981.

Other grievances felt by the Isaaq included the preferential treatment of Ogadeni refugees compared to the local population, in terms of access to education, health care and services, and discrimination against Isaaqs in government and army posts and in business. A dispute over access to the grazing in the Haud reserve was also flaring.

After prolonged talks, leading members of the Isaaq clan met in London in April 1981, to form the SNM. In January 1982, they negotiated with the Ethiopian government to obtain a base and arms. The SNM soon became active in the border area, supporting the Isaaq clan in its ongoing conflict with the Ogaden clan. In October 1982, there was fierce fighting in the Gashaamo area.

The war between the Isaaq-SNM and the Ogaden-WSLF involved violence against civilians, by both forces and on both sides of the border. At first, the abuses were almost entirely by the WSLF, because it had a

³⁰ See Africa Watch Report, *Somalia: A Government at War with its own People*, January 1990.

near-monopoly on arms. Lorries were ambushed, traders stopped and robbed, houses looted, animals stolen, women raped and civilians killed. In early 1979, between Wajale and Alleybadey, two WSLF fighters raped a woman, whose teenage brother then retaliated by shooting the fighters. The commander of the WSLF unit then arrived and summarily executed the boy and two other family members.

One SNM abuse occurred in December 1981 when Isaaq fighters stopped a truck at Dhaberooble, between Warder and Degahabur, and killed six WSLF fighters and 13 civilians, all members of the Ogaden clan.³¹

Clashes between the fronts were intense during late 1982 and 1983. The SNM succeeded in cutting the WSLF off from its rear bases in northern Somalia. Together with the Ethiopian army offensives, this was a fatal blow to the WSLF, which never recovered. There was a final round of fighting in December 1984–January 1985, but by this time the WSLF was effectively finished.

The Refugee Issue

The Ethiopian government engaged in a concerted campaign to make refugees in Somalia return to Ethiopian territory. The refugees' destination was to be government-controlled reception centers. On the whole, Oromo returnees were then villagized, and Ogadenis were given animals.

The returnee issue over this period is complex. Tens of thousands of refugees returned and were assisted. But the Ethiopian government consistently exaggerated the number of returnees, subjected many to abuses, and used the returnee program for counter-insurgency purposes.

The Somali government was also at fault. Throughout the 1980s, an important factor determining what refugees decided to do was the increasingly unpleasant quality life in the Somali refugee camps. This was because of the policies and corruption of the Somali government, which diverted much international aid intended for the refugees, and increasing levels of violence in Somalia, which the refugees were caught up in and contributed to. Most seriously, the Somali government recruited refugees into the WSLF, and after 1983, into the Somali army (see chapter 19). The Somali government also consistently inflated the estimates of refugee numbers, and denied the existence of genuine returnee movements. Civilian refugees were caught between two evils, and their return to Ethiopia often

³¹ According to one report, a Majerteen woman was also killed, because she was pregnant by her Ogadeni husband and the unborn child was thus an Ogadeni.

indicated merely that conditions in Somalia had deteriorated; not that those in Ethiopia had improved.

The attempts to obtain the repatriation of the refugees involved the international humanitarian community, especially UNHCR, which often appeared to be ignorant of the realities of the situation.

The first attempts at repatriation occurred in May 1980 and coincided with a visit by senior UN officials, invited by the government. One official wrote:

The UNHCR representative broadly agrees with the [Ethiopian] government perception of the situation, and feels that on both humanitarian and pragmatic grounds a comprehensive approach is needed; this would include assistance for both the displaced and affected population in Ethiopia thus reducing the incentive to swell the number of refugees in neighbouring countries. ... [The Ethiopian government] feels that the UN system is taking a one-sided view of the situation by launching a large-scale assistance programme in Somalia and doing almost nothing in Ethiopia. They feel that this will only aggravate the situation in attracting a large number of people to cross the border.³²

The UN and ICVA missions referred to above followed from this initiative, as did attempts to initiate a repatriation program. The opinion (never tested) that the presence of international assistance on the far side of a border "pulled" refugees there -- enticing them to abandon their homes and trek through a wilderness to a strange country -- continued to have a substantial and dangerous influence on assistance and protection policies to refugees in the Horn for years afterwards.

In March 1981, a UN mission asked for funds for 300,000 families (1.5 million people) to be villagized over the next 18 months. Many of these were anticipated to be returning refugees. The following month, at the first International Conference for Assistance to Refugees in Africa (ICARA I), held in Geneva, the Ethiopian Commissioner for Relief and Rehabilitation claimed that "as a result of a general amnesty, more than 151,000 Ethiopian refugees have returned," including 129,000 from Somalia.

However, according to one source, UNHCR officials could provide details of merely "less than three hundred" returnees,³³ and the Somali government denied that any had left. One part explanation for this

³² Dr Zaki Hassan, UNICEF Executive Board, "Report on a Visit to Ethiopia, 13-17 May 1980," Addis Ababa.

³³ *STORM*, 1.3, June 1981, pp. 8-9.

discrepancy is that the returning refugees did not need to surrender their ration cards from the Somali camps in order to receive assistance (chiefly sheep and goats) from the Ethiopian RRC -- they merely needed to prove that they had been in a refugee camp. It was therefore possible for a refugee to collect the assistance on the Ethiopian side, and then return to Somalia to continue drawing rations.

At ICARA I, on the prompting of the Ethiopian government, the UN submitted projects anticipating the need to assist 268,000 returning refugees from Sudan, Djibouti and Somalia over the next three years -- despite the absence of an agreement with either Sudan or Somalia for the voluntary return of refugees. "It is anticipated that Ethiopians living in Somalia will return as security and basic living conditions improve in the southeastern part of Ethiopia" the proposal asserted.³⁴ The UN document asked for a total of \$27 million plus food aid in international assistance for Ethiopia.

In September the government became more ambitious and asked for aid for an anticipated 542,000 returnees.³⁵ In January 1982, it claimed that 567,000 refugees had returned home.

However, these figures were gross exaggerations. According to UNHCR the following August, "over 10,000" had returned. In 1981, the ICVA team had met individual returnees, and was assured that several thousand were living in the settlements it visited, but made no independent investigation of the total numbers -- all the figures in its report had been provided by the RRC. However, the "returnees" in el Kere (Bale) turned out to "have returned from *the bush* and from Somalia."³⁶ In 1982 a team from the League of Red Cross societies also visited, spending six days on a guided tour of returnee camps. Team members were told by their RRC hosts that one of the camps, Degahabur (Harerghe), had held 10,000 returnees some time previously, but the inhabitants present at the time had never left Ethiopia.³⁷

³⁴ UN Coordinating Committee for Relief and Rehabilitation and RRC of Ethiopia, "Short-Term Relief and Rehabilitation Needs in Ethiopia," March 1981, Annex D.

³⁵ RRC, "The Returnee Problem in Ethiopia and Assistance Requirements," Addis Ababa, September 1981.

³⁶ ICVA, 1982, Annex III, p. 3, emphasis added.

³⁷ League of Red Cross Societies, "UNHCR/RRC/League Programme of Assistance to Returnees in Ethiopia," Circular, September 17, 1982.

Despite the absence of an impartial assessment of the situation, in 1981 the UNHCR initiated a small pilot program for returnees, which was substantially enlarged in 1982, when it anticipated spending \$26 million to feed 200,000 returnees and set up three rehabilitation centers (two of them in Harerghe), 25 reception centers, and various smaller projects for returnees.³⁸ However, the reaction of the international community was mixed. While Australia provided 25,000 MT of food aid, the US refused to participate.

The Ethiopian government failed to obtain all the assistance it wanted for this program. This was related to the lack of a "tripartite agreement" between Ethiopia, Somalia and UNHCR to repatriate the refugees. Despite the optimism expressed in the UN submission to ICARA I, relatively few refugees did return home (in the tens of thousands at the most), and the Somali government resisted pressure from the Ethiopian government and the UNHCR to assent to a program of "voluntary" repatriation.

A major reason why UNHCR promoted the returnee program was impatience with the Somali government, which was also "playing the numbers game" and trying to retain its refugee population and exaggerate its size in order to obtain international assistance. The refugees were pawns as all sides played politics with humanitarian assistance. However, the exploitation and abuse of the refugees in Somalia did not justify promoting the repatriation program.

Skepticism about how voluntary such a program would have been is warranted, as can be shown by the case of Djibouti. In June 1980, the Ethiopian government declared its intention of receiving the refugees back, and shortly afterwards a tripartite commission of the governments of Ethiopia and Djibouti together with UNHCR was formed to oversee the repatriation.³⁹ In July 1981, reports indicate that 20 refugees were forcibly repatriated, of whom 14 were summarily executed on arrival. The following two years saw numerous incidents of intimidation and harassment of the refugees by the Djibouti authorities, and coercion to repatriate. There were no further reports of executions of returnees, but a number were detained and sentenced to prison terms, despite promises of an amnesty.

Meanwhile, the Ethiopian government legislated against refugees. Under Article 12 of the Revised Penal Code of 1981, attempting to leave the country without official permission is a "counter-revolutionary act"

³⁸ Letter from Poul Hartling, head of UNHCR, to donors, dated April 30, 1982.

³⁹ Jeff Crisp, "Voluntary Repatriation Programmes for African Refugees, A Critical Examination," British Refugee Council, London, 1984.

equivalent to treason, and punishable by between five and 25 years imprisonment.

By mid-1983, the repatriation campaign from Djibouti had led to the return of 13,500 refugees, about half through the tripartite program, and half independently of it.

The Ethiopian government often used the term "returnees" to refer to both prisoners of war released by the rebel fronts and returning refugees. Returning prisoners of war were placed in "reception centers" in Gonder, Meqele and Harerghe, where there were frequent reports of beating and execution.

During this period the government of Somalia consistently refused to contemplate a tripartite agreement for repatriation. When such an agreement was made in 1986, only a small minority of refugees elected to use it -- about 7,200 over four years. However, during the late 1980s, perhaps 500,000 refugees did return spontaneously, as conditions deteriorated in Somalia and marginally improved in southeast Ethiopia. In 1991, with the outbreak of widespread violence in Somalia, that return flow accelerated.

The Creation of Famine

During 1978-84 the government of Mengistu Haile Mariam responded to the insurgencies in the southeast with brutality, attacks on the economic base of the population, restricting movement, and creating and exploiting divisions within the society. This was the bloodiest period in the modern history of the region. The government's military strategy was instrumental in impoverishing the people, restricting their mobility and economic activities, and creating famine. The activities of the Ethiopian army, the SNM, WSLF and the Somali government combined to prevent the Ogadeni herders from freely migrating, trading or cultivating. Meanwhile, the combination of military offensives and forced relocation left much of the Oromo population destitute.

There was chronic famine in much of the southeast during the whole period 1979-84, and humanitarian assistance was used as an instrument for the further extension of state control. When drought also occurred in 1984, the famine became more widespread and severe.

The true story of these campaigns and the related famine remains largely unresearched and untold. The account given above is merely an outline based on the few available sources -- many of which were produced with the clear intention of concealing what was actually going on.

6. THE RED TERROR

The Red Terror was a campaign of urban counter-insurgency waged in the main cities of Ethiopia, notably Addis Ababa, between 1976 and 1978. The name "Red Terror" was officially used by the government, and it accurately reflects the way in which excessive violence was used to terrify the population and eliminate dissent. It was one of the most systematic uses of mass murder by the state ever witnessed in Africa.

The number who died in the Red Terror is not known — it is certainly well in excess of 10,000. A full treatment of the Red Terror would require a separate and extremely lengthy report. What follows here is merely a cursory examination, in order to place the episode in the context of the Ethiopian government's counter-insurgency methods.

The Urban Opposition

In the 1960s and 1970s, opposition to the rule of Haile Selassie crystallized among the educated, particularly university students. These students were attracted by left wing political philosophy and nursed grievances over their living and studying conditions, the lack of a student union and student publications, and the shortage of career opportunities for them following graduation. This led directly to support for violent methods to overthrow the government. Student songs praised Ho Chi Minh and Che Guevara, and a popular slogan was "Through Bale not Bole," referring to the expectation that revolutionary change would occur through rural insurrection (as in Bale) and not through returning exiles (who arrive in Addis Ababa through Bole International Airport).¹

Reflecting pre-existing divisions in the student movement, after the revolution, splits soon appeared between different radical elements. The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) was one group, the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement (known by its Amharic acronym, MEISON) was another. There were some important tactical differences between EPRP and MEISON, notably over the Eritrean question,² but their political programs both espoused an almost indistinguishable brand of Marxism. By 1976, the chief difference was that MEISON was prepared to cooperate

¹ Randi Ronning Balsvik, *Haile Selassie's Students: The Intellectual and Social Background to Revolution, 1952-1977*, E. Lansing, Mich., 1985.

² EPRP was prepared to allow the Eritreans to exercise a greater degree of self-determination.

with the military government to achieve communism, whereas the EPRP was not -- indeed it was ready to wage urban guerrilla warfare in order to bring down the Dergue. In the popular perception, MEISON also came to be identified as a predominantly Oromo organization, and EPRP as predominantly Amhara -- perceptions that became self-fulfilling.

In mid-1976, responding to a government crackdown on student members of the opposition, the EPRP began to assassinate leading members of the Dergue and its client institutions, notably the urban dwellers' associations (*kebeles*).³ The EPRP was suspected of complicity in a failed coup attempt in July 1976. 21 coup plotters were executed, and arrests of EPRP members began in August. On September 23, there was the first of nine officially listed assassination attempts on Mengistu. On October 2, the EPRP assassinated Fikre Merid, a leading MEISON and government cadre. Ten senior government officials and 15 members of the secret service were killed in the next two months. The public assassinations continued into 1977; several hundred were probably killed in this way, though some of the murders attributed to EPRP may not in fact have been carried out by that organization, but either by private individuals or by government agents.

The Red Terror: The First Wave

The killing of people suspected to be members of the EPRP began in September 1976. 21 were executed on October 21 and the deaths of a further 17 were announced on November 18. However, it was not until the killing of Gen. Teferi Bante by Mengistu in February 1977, and the latter's assumption of supreme power that the Red Terror was officially declared, and the mass killings began. Mengistu labelled the EPRP's sporadic campaign of assassination the "White Terror" and Lt-Col. Atnafu Abate promised "for every revolutionary killed, a thousand counter-revolutionaries executed."⁴ The promised ratio was not to be much of an exaggeration. Atnafu began organizing "Defense of the Revolution Squads," distributing arms to Addis Ababa *kebele* members who were considered to be loyal. In a public speech on April 17, Mengistu called upon the people to fight against the "enemies of the revolution" and smashed three bottles filled with blood (or something resembling blood)

³ The following account relies heavily on: Rene LeFort, *Ethiopia: An Heretical Revolution?* London, 1983.

⁴ LeFort, 1983, p. 199. In November 1977, Atnafu was one of the revolutionaries to be killed -- on the orders of his longstanding friend, Mengistu.

to signify the impending destruction of imperialism, feudalism and bureaucratic capitalism.

On February 26, 44 prisoners were taken to a place outside Addis Ababa and executed. On March 2, 1977, several people were shot dead by government forces for distributing EPRP literature during a pro-government demonstration.⁵ Over a thousand were detained during searches of the city on March 23-27. May Day had become the occasion for revolutionary groups to demonstrate their popular support, and EPRP planned to stage large rallies. Starting on the night of April 29, rural Defense Squads arrived in the capital, and, together with local *kebele* officials and soldiers, began a massacre of suspected EPRP supporters. The official government estimate is that 732 were killed over the next few days. Others believe the figure was in fact 2,000 or more.⁶ On May 7-8, a daytime curfew was instituted and house-to-house searches were conducted, with thousands being arbitrarily detained by Defense Squads and soldiers. On May 17, the Secretary-General of Swedish Save the Children Fund stated that "one thousand children have been massacred in Addis Ababa and their bodies, lying in the streets, are ravaged by roving hyenas." He estimated that 100-150 young people -- some as young as 12 -- were being killed every night.⁷ On the night of June 4/5, about 400 students were killed. In total, at least 2,500 were killed in this first phase of the terror.

Bodies were left on the roadside to advertise the killings of the previous night -- those who inspected the piles of bodies to see if their friends or relatives were among the corpses were targeted for execution or imprisonment themselves. Relatives were forbidden to mourn. In other cases, relatives had to pay one Ethiopian dollar for each "wasted bullet" in order to have the body returned.

There were also mass arrests of suspected EPRP supporters. Many of those arrested were subjected to torture, and many "disappeared" after spending some time in detention. Relatives were usually allowed to bring food and clothing to detainees, and learned of the detainees' transfer from one prison to another when the prison guards instructed them to take their food elsewhere. Similarly, they learned of the death or disappearance of their detained relative when the guards told them that it was no longer necessary to bring food. In some instances, the prison authorities deceived

⁵ Amnesty International, *Human Rights Violations in Ethiopia*, November 1978, p. 14.

⁶ Amnesty International, 1978, p. 14; LeFort, 1983, p. 201.

⁷ Amnesty International, 1978, pp. 14-15.

the relatives, and continued to accept food for weeks or months after the detainee had died or been executed.

Rene LeFort described the typical profile of the victim: "Simply knowing how to read and write and being aged about 20 or less were enough to define the potential or actual 'counter-revolutionary' The authorities were even able to institute a law authorizing the arrest of children between eight and twelve years."⁸

The Red Terror: The Second and Third Waves

The EPRP was largely crushed in Addis Ababa by the first wave of the Red Terror, and retreated to a rural base in Tigray. However, the killings and arrests continued. Though the ostensible target remained the EPRP, the Dergue was now turning on *kebele* members suspected to be more loyal to MEISON than the Dergue, and on MEISON itself. Haile Fida, the leader of MEISON and confidante and ideologue of Mengistu, was detained in August 1977. After spending several months in prison, he disappeared. Many other MEISON cadres were arrested shortly afterwards. In October the second wave of arrests and executions took place, during which time an estimated 3,000–4,000 people were killed.

Much of the killing in October was conducted not by the Defense Squads and army, but in the course of a civil war between MEISON and the remnants of the EPRP. Both organizations had been thoroughly infiltrated by security agents, who were able to assassinate cadres of the opposing organization, while disclaiming government responsibility for the act. The continued killings by ostensible members of EPRP also created a justification for the Dergue's continuing repression.

By the end of 1977, MEISON members had been thoroughly purged from the ranks of government and the higher offices of the *kebeles*. However, many remained at the lower levels, especially in the provinces.

The third wave of the Red Terror took place between December 1977 and February 1978. 300 were killed on the night of December 16. On December 21, Defense Squad members opened fire with machine guns on people praying in a mosque. One Ethiopian estimated that during this phase 25–30 people were killed in an "ordinary" day.⁹ By the end of the year, Amnesty International estimated that 30,000 political detainees were held in the central prisons and the detention centers of the 291 *kebeles* of Addis

⁸ LeFort, 1983, p. 202.

⁹ Babile Tola, *To Kill a Generation: The Red Terror in Ethiopia*, Washington D.C., 1989, p. 144.

Ababa.¹⁰ This figure must be considered a very cautious estimate because of the large numbers held in provincial towns.

By this time, the killings were less public. Most were executed in prison, and few bodies were left on the streets. However, the killings were at least as frequent as before. Perhaps 5,000 were killed in Addis Ababa in these months, and many more in provincial towns.

Though most of the killings -- at least in Addis Ababa -- were over by March 1978, detentions and executions continued throughout the year.

The Campaign Against the Merchants

A significant minority of those killed or detained during the mid 1970s were traders and shopkeepers. This group, and in particular grain traders, were targets of the new government from 1975. While the campaign against the merchants -- like the corresponding campaign against landlords -- was not strictly part of the Red Terror, it deserves discussion, especially in the light of the 1980s famines.

Grain merchants were blamed in part for the famines of 1972-4, and seen as class enemies of the revolution. Many large merchants fled abroad when the radical political leanings of the Dergue became clear, or joined one of the conservative political-military resistance movements, such as the Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU) which was militarily active in Tigray and Gonder.

In 1973, 90 per cent of all marketed grain was sold through an estimated 20,000-30,000 grain merchants. A small minority of 25 dominated the supply to Addis Ababa, owning a storage capacity of 100,000 tonnes between them.¹¹ This latter group was certainly able to engineer shortages in the city, though in 1973 their chief contribution to famine appears to have been to facilitate the export of grain *from* famine-stricken Wollo to more prosperous Addis Ababa, where food prices rose a mere 20 per cent during the scarcity. Over 75 per cent of grain traders were rurally based and operated using pack animals. While these traders drove hard bargains and occasionally reaped windfall profits, they operated in a highly uncertain commercial environment, and performed an essential service in the redistribution of food.

¹⁰ Amnesty International, 1978, p. 8.

¹¹ J. Holmberg, *Grain Marketing and Land Reform in Ethiopia: An Analysis of the Marketing and Pricing of Food Grains in 1976 after the Land Reform*, Uppsala, 1977, p. 9.

The Special Penal Code of November 1974 included an article prohibiting economic actions which might create or aggravate famine, implicitly equating them with an attack on the state itself. Article 27 was drafted in a vague and ambiguous manner, which was open to a variety of interpretations. The Special Court Martial, instituted at the same time, implemented the law in a draconian manner, and on the occasions when a conviction could not be guaranteed, the Dergue was ready to bypass the courts altogether. Article 27 therefore acted as a powerful deterrent to legitimate as well as illegal economic activity. It is worth quoting in full, to illustrate the vague but intensely threatening environment in which traders were compelled to operate.

Article 27: Jeopardising Defensive Power of the State, Distress or Famine.

- (1) Whosoever intentionally by commission or omission directly or indirectly with culpable negligence commits any prejudicial act leading to the consequence of weakening the defensive power of the State or being aware of such a fact fails to do whatever in his capability or creates within the country a grave state of misery, want or famine, epidemic or epizootic disease or distress, especially by improperly hiding or hoarding, destroying or preventing the transport or distribution of grain, foodstuffs or provisions, or remedies or products necessary to the life and health of man or domestic animals, or where the occurrence of any imminent danger of distress or famine having shown a sign, fails to do whatever in his power to control it, is punishable with rigorous imprisonment from ten years to life, and where the offence was intentional and where death has occurred or many lives have perished the penalty may be death.
- (2) Whosoever, in time of such distress, fails to carry out or carries out improperly, except in the case of force majeure, the obligations or liabilities incumbent upon him, whether as a purveyor, middleman, sub-contractor, carrier or agent, or in any other capacity, in respect to the delivery or handing over of provisions, remedies or any other products to be used to prevent, limit or arrest the distress, is liable to the same punishments.
- (3) Where the offender has acted for gain, a fine not exceeding twenty thousand [Ethiopian] dollars shall be imposed in addition to the penalty prescribed in sub-article (2) hereof.

Many grain merchants were detained and their goods and vehicles confiscated. Others withdrew from the grain trade, fearing the same actions. With no state-run alternative distribution in place, the decline in the private grain trade contributed to rapid food price inflation and shortages in Addis Ababa.

The Dergue did not consider these legal prohibitions comprehensive enough. In July 1976, the Special Penal Code was revised and reissued. The same provisions remained, but an additional one was added. Article 17(A) concerned "economic sabotage" and prescribed the death penalty for actions leading to the destruction or withholding of grain, interruption of work or transport, or "any other similar act."

Immediately after the revised Special Penal Code was promulgated, seven Addis Ababa grain merchants were charged under this new article, and sentenced to long prison terms. General Teferi Bante, then head of state, intervened and changed several of the sentences to death. One of those executed for "economic crimes" had been caught with 20 tons of grain in stock -- four trucks full, and scarcely enough to influence the price of grain in a city of over one million residents. The others had been found with stores of the spice *berbere*.

An additional motivation for the increased pressure on private grain merchants in 1976 was that in that year the government set up the Agricultural Marketing Corporation (AMC), which was to have a monopoly on large-scale grain transactions. Coercion was needed to enforce the monopoly.

In the provinces a large number of merchants were executed in 1976-8. Every small town has stories of traders being killed by firing squads, thrown into trenches, doused with petrol and burned, or disappearing while in detention.

A number of other measures were implemented to humiliate and punish merchants. Many of these consisted of macabre dramas orchestrated by *kebele* officials, in which the poor exacted revenge on their previous oppressors. Merchants were required to participate in auctions, at which an ordinary object -- an egg, a cup of coffee, or a framed photograph of Mengistu -- would be bid for. Each participant would be obliged to outbid the others, from fear of a severe punishment. The price might reach five thousand Ethiopian dollars (or, after the 1976 currency change, Birr) before the auctioneers were satisfied. In some instances, the object of the auction was the right to administer strokes with a whip on the back of another merchant.

This campaign against traders, which continued well into the 1980s (see subsequent chapters) was to have a profound negative impact on rural people's ability to withstand adversity.

The Red Terror in the Provinces

While the killings and detentions were most numerous and most publicized in Addis Ababa, the campaign was also conducted throughout the country, mostly during 1978. Young people in towns such as Asmara, Gonder, Bahir Dar and Jimma are known to have suffered severely. One document detailing the Red Terror gives information on the following incidents:¹²

- * Debre Markos, Gojjam: massacres in October 1976, February, June and August 1977.
- * Dessie and Kombolcha, Wollo: batches of prisoners executed.
- * Gonder, Harerghe, Sidamo, Bale, May 1–15, 1977: 1,713 executed, according to the government.
- * Gonder, November 1977: 54 killed when security forces opened fire on an EPRP demonstration.
- * Before December 1977: 56 prisoners killed in Tigray, 74 in Wollo, 32 in Chebo and Gurage (Shewa), and 56 in Gonder.

During 1978, the government instituted a purge of the leadership of Peasant Associations, replacing the popularly-elected leaders with government appointees. Though not as bloody as the urban terror, this purge was accompanied by many detentions and some executions.

Next to Addis Ababa, the Red Terror was the worst in Tigray. Three different armed opposition movements were active in Tigray at the time – the EDU, with support from feudal lords and large traders, the EPRP, and the TPLF, which succeeded in capturing the headquarters of Tembien district, Abi Adi, in early 1977. In Meqele, the provincial capital, students, merchants and rural people suspected of supporting the TPLF were all equally targets. The following case is an instance of a student suspected of supporting all three rebel organizations, who was examined by Dr Bent Juel-Jensen, a physician, in Sudan in January 1986:

¹² Babile Tola, 1989, pp. 143–4.

T.H. was one of 300 plus young men who had been educated by Ras Mengesha,¹³ a Tigrayan from Tembien; he had worked in Addis as an agricultural expert. In 1978 he was imprisoned in the house which the Emperor had given to [a British professor] together with 470 other unfortunates. He was accused of belonging to the EPRP. He was tortured: electrical prods and burns to the soles of his feet and flogging of the back, both of which left terrible scars when I saw him in '86. When they found no evidence, they changed tack and accused him of being a member of the TPLF, because he was from Tigray. More torture. He was released after six months, and after an adventurous flight via Meqele, from where he escaped dressed as a poor shepherd, he got to the Sudan. He still has problems walking.

Smaller towns in Tigray suffered too. There, the atrocities of the Red Terror followed on without a break from the violence against civilians that was a normal part of counter-insurgency in the preceding years. The following account of killings was given by Woreda Teka, a farmer and trader and member of *Abi Adi baito* (council), to visitors in 1988.¹⁴ It is indicative of the many atrocities that occurred in small towns without gaining any publicity.

Well, to go back to the beginning, the first incident was a massacre by government troops. This was in June 1976: 180 people were lined up in the square (it was market day) and machine-gunned.¹⁵ I remember it was about 11 a.m. There had been a battle with the TPLF a few days before this, and the soldiers said they were executing bandits [*wunbede*]. In fact they just came into the market and rounded up anyone they could find. About a quarter of those shot were women: one had a baby who survived, and we found it alive and still feeding half an hour after she had been killed. There were about 5-600 soldiers in the town that year. They arrived in April and stayed until October when there was another battle. They did have food of their own but kept coming round for extra money.

¹³ Former governor of Tigray and leader of the EDU.

¹⁴ Interview conducted by Sarah Vaughan and Gerry McCann, two visitors to Tigray, November 1988.

¹⁵ Other sources give slightly different numbers: 160 total, or 149 peasants and 19 students (total 168).

The soldiers returned in April [1977] and in August they killed four people at the town clinic. They said they were TPLF leaders, and were organizing resistance, but we all knew who they were -- one was a trader and the other three were peasants.

The next year was the time of the Red Terror, and there was a whole brigade [1,000-1,500 soldiers] in the area: there were *banda* [locally-recruited mercenaries] and militia as well as regular army, and they held the mountains all around here. On 29 January 1978 they killed seven people in their homes with no explanation. They didn't even allow the families to touch the bodies for a whole day -- they were just left outside the houses as a warning. Anyone caught mourning those was put in prison. The victims were:

- * Techane Hagos, 28, who worked in the local government finance office.
- * Lowul Hagos, 25, his brother and a peasant farmer.
- * Azanua, 32, originally from Gonder, working in the sanitation department.
- * Abdel Hakim, 18, a ninth grade student.
- * Three other students from Hagerai Selam whose names I do not know.

The residents of Abi Adi erected a monument to commemorate those killed in the massacre of June 1976. Each time the army occupied the town, the monument was destroyed. Each time the garrison left, the residents rebuilt it.

Impact of the Red Terror

Nobody knows how many people were killed, imprisoned, or forced to flee abroad on account of the Red Terror. A minimum of 10,000 were killed in Addis Ababa alone in 1977, and probably a comparable number in the provinces in 1977 and 1978. A larger number were detained, and subjected to appalling prison conditions and torture. An even larger number became refugees.

The main target of the Red Terror was a generation of urban people with at least minimal education. That generation was lost -- many physically removed, with the remainder so cowed and terrified that any expression of dissent in Addis Ababa was unthinkable for a decade. EPRP members and sympathizers, and others with a similar social or educational profile, were left with a bitter hatred of the Dergue. However, the EPRP

and MEISON were essentially crushed. Over the following 13 years the EPRP engaged in armed opposition in rural areas but never regained its preeminence, and MEISON became almost completely defunct.

Rene LeFort commented:

History offers few examples of revolutions that have devoured their own children with such viciousness and so much cruelty. It can be estimated that, of ten civilians who had actively worked for a radical transformation of Ethiopia, only one escaped arrest, imprisonment, torture, execution or assassination. The revolution swallowed the whole of the young generation of Ethiopian intellectuals, that is literates.¹⁶

A class of merchants was also lost in the Red Terror and the year preceding it. Most of those who survived were either forced out of business or withdrew from fear of reprisals. While the numbers of merchants killed or detained does not approach the tens of thousands of young educated victims, this class has a special significance, because its absence contributed to the famines of the 1980s.

In Tigray, the Red Terror encompassed groups not included in these two classes. Peasants and uneducated townspeople suffered too. Like the EPRP sympathizers, almost all Tigrayans were left with a deep hatred of the government. Unlike the EPRP, however, their resistance was not crushed. The TPLF was battered by the events of 1976–8, but survived and gained popular support. The Dergue was to find that peasant resistance was harder to crush than urban insurrection.

A final consequence of the Red Terror was that it led the Dergue directly to an addiction to rule by terror. In terms of crushing the threat from the EPRP, the Red Terror was a complete success. It was an apparent vindication of the use of indiscriminate and exemplary violence as a counter-insurgency method.

¹⁶ LeFort, 1983, p. 257.

7. TOTAL WAR IN ERITREA, 1978-84

In August 1977, Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam called for "total people's war" against the "aggressors and secessionists."¹ His first target was the Somali invasion: his second was the Eritrean fronts, which were in control of 90 per cent of Eritrea.

In December 1977, the EPLF stormed the port of Massawa, but the attack was repulsed with heavy casualties. It was the turning point of the war in the 1970s. Six months later, the Ethiopian government was able to redeploy its forces from the Ogaden, and continue to mobilize its still-expanding army and air force, and counter-attack in Eritrea. Within a year, the ELF was on the verge of collapse and the EPLF had retreated to the remote and mountainous district of Sahel. Confined to a few barren valleys close to the Sudan border, the Eritrean rebels' final defeat seemed only a matter of time.

In fact, the EPLF was able to withstand everything the Ethiopian government could throw at it. The Ethiopian army continued to expand and acquire more sophisticated weaponry, and employ more brutal techniques. Between 1978 and 1984 the war was waged on an unparalleled scale -- the numbers of offensives and bombing attacks equalled and then surpassed the levels of the southeast. The cost in human terms, both to combatants and civilians, was huge.

While the overriding reality of Eritrea in these years was all out warfare, the government also attempted to employ counter-insurgency methods similar to those used in the southeast, including population displacement and control, economic reconstruction in government-controlled areas, and the return of refugees. It tried to obtain humanitarian funds for this, but met with little success. However, the input of economic resources, including food aid was substantial. Thus, while the counter-insurgency strategy directly created famine conditions, there was some compensatory assistance to the population.

Army Offensives, 1978-81

In May 1978, using a newly-completed airfield in Meqele in neighboring Tigray, the Ethiopian air force began a campaign of saturation bombing of positions in Eritrea held by the ELF and EPLF. While many of the targets hit were military, the bombers also attacked towns, villages and

¹ Quoted in: *Financial Times*, London, August 25, 1977.

animal herds. In June, in response to peace offers from the ELF and EPLF and diplomatic pressure from the USSR and Cuba, the government held a political conference on the future of Eritrea, but failed to make any significant concessions to the rebels.

The ground offensive started in July, and in a few weeks captured all the towns that the ELF and EPLF had held in southern and central Eritrea. During the offensive, the army handed out basic commodities that had been in short supply, such as sugar and soap, to the civilian population of the towns. Any benefits this rather obvious attempt to win favor may have had were negated by a policy of mass detention of people who had cooperated with the rebel administration.

The second offensive began in November 1978, aimed at the relief of Massawa and the recapture of Keren. An even larger army was deployed, including large contingents of armor. On November 25-26, there was a huge two-day battle with the EPLF at Elabored, which ended inconclusively. However, the EPLF was badly mauled and decided to abandon Keren and the nearby towns, and withdraw to the mountains of Sahel, where the terrain was appropriate for a last stand. This was called the "strategic withdrawal."

The ELF, which had taken the brunt of the first offensive, was already buckling as a military force. By continuing to engage the Ethiopian army, rather than retreat, it ensured its military defeat.

The Ethiopian attack included a number of incidents of the indiscriminate bombing of refugees. The journalist Dan Connell witnessed people leaving Keren just before its occupation by the army:

Over 20,000 people streamed northward toward the Sudan border. Some carried small bundles in their arms, occasionally a battered leather suitcase on their heads. A flatbed truck cruised back into Keren carrying seven women who had lost their children along the way, their tearstained faces belying their stoical silence ...

On the following day the Ethiopians began an indiscriminate bombardment of the area with long range artillery, Stalin Organ rocket launchers and MiG aircraft. Late in the afternoon, three MiG-23s hit one makeshift refugee camp of 2,000 to 3,000 people some 40 kilometers north of the battle lines. Paramedics carried the 65 wounded to the edge of the road and tended them there while awaiting EPLF trucks to take them out after dark ... Among the injured was one family of five. Berhane Gebreyesus lay on a canvas stretcher while his wife and three children, also wounded, huddled around him. His one-and-a-half-year-old baby shivered with shock from a head wound that was

to claim his young life the next morning. Ten had been killed outright in the raid. Thirty more would not survive the next 24 hours.²

The EPLF's "strategic withdrawal" involved removing anything of use in Keren and the surrounding area. "Not even a nail was left to the enemy. Everything was dismantled and taken away, piece by piece," said one eyewitness.³ In some instances, particularly in the early days of the withdrawal, when Keren was abandoned, this descended into something more akin to panic looting.

The third offensive took place in January-February 1979, and consisted in a three-pronged attack on Nacfa, the headquarters of Sahel district, where the EPLF had set up its "liberated area" and was beginning to construct defensive lines. More areas were evacuated in the face of the assault, and the EPLF was able to dismantle and remove the infrastructure more systematically.

A fourth offensive was launched towards Nacfa in March 1979, a fifth offensive in July. The army Chief of Staff wrote a newspaper article anticipating total victory, entitled: "Days of remnants of secessionist bandits lurking in bushes numbered."⁴ Over 50,000 troops were deployed in the attacks, together with large amounts of armor. Most of the attacks were destroyed well short of their target. Between July 14 and 22, the army lost an estimated 6,000 dead.⁵ Many died of thirst while trying to retreat. The war was in a stalemate.

Indiscriminate bombing continued. Visitors to places behind the EPLF front line told of an average of four or five sorties being flown each day.

Another offensive, launched towards Nacfa in December 1979, ended in a disaster and rout for government forces. The EPLF was able to counter-attack and push the army back as far as its headquarters at Afabet.

Along with massive and sustained bombing, the chief military tactic used by the army was the deployment of massed infantry and armored columns, driving up the narrow rocky valleys towards the emplacements of the EPLF. Tens of thousands of conscript soldiers with minimal training

² Quoted in *Horn of Africa*, 4.1, (1981) p. 23.

³ Paul Brutsaert, Belgian Committee for Medical Assistance to Eritrea, "Eyewitness Report," 1979.

⁴ Quoted in: Christopher Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia*, Cambridge, 1988, p. 208.

⁵ *Africa Confidential*, 20.17, August 22, 1979, p. 7.

were marched towards death, disablement or capture. Over 20,000 were killed during 1978-9 alone. Many of their skeletons, bleached by the sun, still litter the valleys of northern Eritrea, together with the hulks of tanks. A prisoner of war commented: "Eritrea gobbles up entire divisions."⁶

The failure of the massive conventional offensives of 1978-9 led to a change in military tactics in 1980 and 1981. Dawit Wolde Giorgis, who was political commissioner for Eritrea at the time, argues that the policy of "scorched earth" was abandoned in 1980.⁷ Other sources note that from 1980 onwards there were more attacks on non-combatants, including stepped-up aerial bombardment and a greater level of harassment in the towns. What appears to have occurred is that fewer large-scale offensives were launched, with correspondingly less accompanying widespread destruction of everything in the army's path. For two years, while the government prepared its next offensive, the war was fought more as a pacification campaign.

In December 1980 the government launched a relatively small and ineffective attack, which petered out without military gains to either side. 1981 passed without a major military offensive.

The policy of setting up protected garrison-villages along roads, familiar from 1966-71, was revived, albeit initially on a small scale.⁸ Peasant Associations were also set up in south Eritrea, to provide closer control of the population. Curfews and restrictions on movement were reimposed. Most villages had only one or two official entrances, and people attempting to enter or leave through other routes were liable to be detained or shot.

Land mines were planted on military lines, to prevent penetration by the EPLF and defection by soldiers, and around protected villages and other areas used by civilians to constrain their movement.

Soldiers guarding villages and military patrols exacted a continuous toll on civilians. The Eritrean Relief Association (ERA) produced figures for the civilian victims of these regular patrols, which roughly correspond to independent estimates made by people in government held areas. ERA claimed that between January and June 1980, the army detained 1,475 rural people and executed 240, and soldiers raped at least 110 women. Nearly 500 cows and 80 tons of grain were confiscated from peasants, and 500,000

⁶ Quoted in: Pietro Petrucci, "The Kremlin's Africa Sickness", reproduced in: *Eritrea Information*, November 1979.

⁷ Dawit Wolde Giorgis, *Red Tears: Revolution, War and Famine in Ethiopia*, Trenton, N.J., 1989, p. 99.

⁸ *Africa Confidential*, 20.17, August 22, 1979, p. 8.

people were forcibly displaced by the joint policies of relocation and harassment by patrols and aerial bombardment.

Bombing raids, which in 1978–9 had mostly presaged ground attacks, now became a regular part of the war of intimidation and attrition. In the first half of 1980, ERA estimated that bombing raids had resulted in 390 houses being destroyed and 463 cattle killed.

The first months of 1980 also saw significant developments within the rebel fronts. The EPLF was able to launch a counter-attack on government positions in early 1980. A few months afterwards, the alliance between the EPLF and the ELF which had held since 1975 began to break, and quickly developed into an irrevocable split. There were some armed clashes between the groups, for instance in August 1980, but large-scale civil war was avoided in part because of military weakness of the ELF. The TPLF assisted the EPLF in its attacks on ELF positions. Most of the ELF fighters retreated into Sudan, where they were detained and disarmed by the Sudan government. The last major group arrived in Karakon, eastern Sudan, in 1982. The ELF, already rent by schism, split still further.

Estimates for the total number of people, both combatants and civilians, killed between 1978 and 1980 agree on a figure of between 70,000–80,000. In 1978 there were 250,000 Eritrean refugees in eastern Sudan (up from 100,000 in 1975); by September 1979 there were 390,000; and by March 1981, 419,000. The worst was yet to come.

The Red Star Campaign

The size of the army continued to rise every year. By 1982, the total manpower stood at an estimated 245,000, and further mobilization was proceeding apace.⁹ Material and logistical help was provided on an ever-increasing scale by the USSR, and extensive Libyan support was also provided.

After the comparative lull of 1980–1, 1982 was to be the worst year of war in Eritrea to date, in which the government made an all-out attempt to crush the EPLF. It was also the year in which the government tried its most systematic attempt to use less destructive counter-insurgency methods, including economic reconstruction.

In January 1982, Mengistu moved the national capital temporarily to Asmara. By this time nearly two thirds of the army was stationed in Eritrea. In a speech on January 25, Mengistu announced the Multifaceted

⁹ NOVIB, "War and Famine in Ethiopia and Eritrea: An Investigation into the Arms Deliveries to the Struggling Parties in Eritrea and Tigray," Zeist, the Netherlands, 1991, p. 12.

Revolutionary Campaign, and in response to the planned US "Bright Star" exercises in the Middle East, dubbed the forthcoming offensive the "Red Star." He described the EPLF as "anti-freedom, anti-unity, anti-people and anti-peace bandit gangs" and "the pitiful dregs of history" and confidently predicted their imminent demise.¹⁰ This campaign was the end result of two years of planning and preparations.

The offensive started with a campaign of saturation bombing. Nacfa was bombed four or five times a day and -- in a new development -- often at night as well. Phosphorous and cluster bombs were used. The EPLF alleged that chemical weapons were also used, but this allegation has never been proved.

The ground campaign opened with activity on seven different fronts, including Tigray, and a thrust up the Sudanese border. The Sudan government allowed Ethiopian tanks to cross Sudanese territory to attack the EPLF in the rear. There was aerial bombardment on trade routes between Eritrea and Tigray, to disrupt supplies and communications between the EPLF and TPLF.

The Red Star offensive involved the largest number of troops ever deployed in Eritrea -- more than 120,000 were involved in the attacks on the EPLF base areas. The sheer number of soldiers in the territory put unexpected strain on the food resources, and the government was compelled to institute an airlift of food to Asmara for the army.¹¹ The offensive saw a return to the "scorched earth" policy of 1978-9, though on a larger scale. The enormous level of sustained aerial bombardment and ground attack devastated large areas of northern and western Eritrea.

The conscript soldiers in the Ethiopian ranks were used for massive assaults on the EPLF positions around Nacfa, in the hope that sheer weight of numbers would overrun the rebel lines. It did not. The EPLF were outnumbered by eight to one but had the advantage of an excellent defensive position. The advancing columns were repeatedly ambushed and then machine-gunned as they stormed the EPLF-held mountainsides. There were perhaps 40,000 casualties among the government forces.

The Red Star campaign also involved other counter-insurgency elements, including forced relocation, attempts at economic reconstruction, and attempts to obtain the return of refugees from Sudan. As initially conceived, the campaign was to be "multifaceted," with primacy given to the "hearts

¹⁰ Clapham, 1988, p. 209.

¹¹ *Africa Confidential*, 23.5, March 3, 1982, p. 8.

and minds" component. As actually implemented, the military aspect dominated.

Just before the military offensive was launched, the EPLF staged a guerrilla raid on the military airport in Asmara, and destroyed a number of airplanes. The TPLF also made attacks near Meqele. These emphasized the government's need for more widespread counter-insurgency measures.

Control of the Population

Throughout the year, tighter control was exerted on all civilians living in government-controlled areas. Curfews were enforced from dusk or slightly afterwards and movement was restricted. Those wishing to travel needed to produce an ID card, an up-to-date rent book, tax clearance, proof of future return, and (in the case of skilled people) a signed statement by a guarantor who provided a bond of 25,000 Birr. Only then could a travel permit be issued, though payment of bribes was also usually necessary. A macabre joke common among Eritreans was that in order to travel to attend a funeral it was necessary to apply for a permit a week before the person died.

A number of means were employed in order to maintain surveillance of the population. Apart from the regular activities of the security services, such as phone-tapping and interception of mail, there were attempts to encourage civilians to spy on each other, and to provoke signs of dissent, so as to identify non-government supporters and enforce conformity. In elections to *kebele* committees, all the residents of a neighborhood would be called together. The government's list of nominations would be read out, and then the assembled citizens would be asked for additional suggestions. Those with the temerity to make a suggestion would be singled out for surveillance and possible arrest. Individual citizens were asked to help organize frequent "political" and "fundraising" meetings, with obligatory attendance and "voluntary contributions" by all. Those who participated in the organization would have to report on the enthusiasm shown by the co-organizers. People who failed to attend would be subject to reprisals. Some "contributions," ostensibly for objectives such as reconstruction and the literacy campaign, were deducted from wages at source, others were donated at the supposed "social" functions. Non-payment would lead to reprisals.

One consequence of the tighter restrictions was that rural people on both sides of the battle lines, who had hitherto been able to cross the lines with relative ease to obtain marketed or relief food on the other side, could now do so only with much greater difficulty.

The reconstruction element in the Red Star campaign included plans to rebuild several schools, hospitals and factories. A special levy of ten per cent was introduced on the salaries of all government employees. The government claimed that \$100 million was spent on reconstruction in Eritrea, including \$3 million on the demolition of a public garden and its replacement by a concrete stadium and "revolution square."¹² The true amount spent is not known, but by mid-1982, much of Eritrea's industry, out of action since 1977, was functioning again.¹³

Refugees

The Red Star campaign coincided with Ethiopia's (successful) attempt to promote the return of refugees from Djibouti and the (unsuccessful) attempt to encourage refugees in Somalia to return. An attempt was also made to ensure the repatriation of the 400,000 Eritrean refugees in Sudan.

The roots of the attempts to obtain repatriation of Eritreans went back to 1981. In April of that year, the Ethiopian government, through the UN, presented to the first International Conference on Assistance to Refugees in Africa (ICARA I) a project for an anticipated 100,000 Eritrean returnees over three years. The UN and the government jointly claimed: "Over the last 18 months, Ethiopia's contacts with the governments of Djibouti and Sudan have provided a favourable context for the repatriation of refugees from these two countries."¹⁴ The government had not, however, made contact with the refugees, who expressed no desire to return under the prevailing circumstances. The government claimed that a pilot scheme catering for 10,000 returnees had already been set up in Keren, Eritrea. Dr Abdel Rahman al Bashir, the Sudanese Commissioner for Refugees, denied that 10,000 refugees had left Sudan for Eritrea -- such an outflow could not have gone unnoticed, and the staff in his offices on the border had not seen any movement of refugees back to Eritrea. The Ethiopian government and UNHCR did not comply with a request by the Sudanese government for an independent mission to evaluate the numbers of returnees and their condition.

¹² *Africa Contemporary Record*, 1981-2, p. B159.

¹³ In the late 1980s much of the industrial equipment was dismantled and taken to Addis Ababa.

¹⁴ UN Coordinating Committee for Relief and Rehabilitation and RRC of Ethiopia, "Short-Term Relief and Rehabilitation Needs in Ethiopia," March 1981.

In September 1981, the RRC made more substantial requests to UNHCR. Claiming that refugees "had been forced to move [by the Sudan government] with a view to lure international assistance," the RRC appeal document asked for \$116 million. This was based on the claims that 22,000 Eritreans had returned so far, and a further 340,000 would be coming back within four years. (58,000 returnees from Tigray and Gonder were also anticipated.)¹⁵

The 1981 repatriation initiative fell short of the government's hopes. UNHCR donated only \$1.3 million for the supposed 10,000 Eritrean returnees.¹⁶ Attempts to encourage the return of refugees continued over the following years. In April 1982, the UNHCR proposed setting up a sub-office for returnees in Asmara, several reception centers, and a rehabilitation center at Ali Gidir, near Tessenei close to the Sudan border. The UNHCR and the Ethiopian Embassy in Khartoum agreed that any refugee in Sudan could register at the embassy and obtain free and safe passage home. In 1982, 424 registered; in 1983, 142 did so.¹⁷ Despite the evident lack of demand for repatriation, UNHCR attempted to set up a tripartite commission between itself and the Sudanese and Ethiopian governments in July 1983. The Sudan government declined, endorsing the view of its major donor, the USA, that repatriation was not feasible until political conditions in Ethiopia had changed. However, UNHCR took unilateral action and sent a mission to eastern Sudan to assess the prospects for repatriation. The mission arrived in Kassala in January 1984 on the same day that 500 Ethiopian soldiers arrived in the town demanding asylum after their garrison at Tessenei had been captured by the EPLF. No more was heard of "voluntary repatriation" after this embarrassing incident.

In 1982, the Ethiopian government stepped up pressure on the Sudan government to cease giving asylum to Eritrean refugees. The Sudan government had abandoned its offensive policy towards Ethiopia in 1978, due to domestic political considerations, recognition of the military ascendancy of the Dergue, and the failure of President Jaafar Nimeiri to obtain support for Eritrean independence from the Organization for African Unity. A period of conciliation with Ethiopia followed. In 1979, Sudan failed to protest an Ethiopian military incursion in pursuit of Ethiopian

¹⁵ RRC, "The Returnee Problem in Ethiopia," Addis Ababa, September 1981.

¹⁶ This amounts to \$130 per head. UNHCR gave \$15.9 million to the 441,000 Eritrean refugees in Sudan, or \$36 per head.

¹⁷ Ahmad Karadawi, "Refugee Policy in the Sudan, 1967-1984," DPhil thesis, Oxford, 1988, p. 331.

Democratic Union forces, and during the Red Star offensive, Ethiopian tanks crossed Sudanese territory with the prior agreement of the government. In July 1982, Colonel Mengistu pushed further, threatening the Sudanese Vice-President with unspecified reprisals unless Sudan withdrew support for Eritrean refugees.¹⁸ The Sudanese government refused, pointing out that it gave only access for the EPLF to Port Sudan and humanitarian assistance. However, at that moment the Sudan government was itself changing towards a more assertive policy of supporting the rebel movements in Ethiopia. Though Sudan never provided military supplies, training or bases, free access to Sudanese territory and intelligence sharing was provided, a policy that was to continue until the overthrow of President Nimeiri in April 1985.

The War in 1983-4

The Red Star offensive failed. By May 1982, it had failed to capture Nacfa, and it was unofficially abandoned on June 20. The EPLF was even able to counter-attack and push government lines back. Having been launched with huge publicity, the offensive ended in complete silence from the government media.

1983 saw an offensive in March on the Halhal front, north of Keren. Known as the "Stealth Offensive" because of the lack of publicity surrounding it, government forces succeeded in overrunning EPLF lines, but not in inflicting a significant defeat on the insurgents. Attacks continued until August, and severely disrupted the planting of crops in Senhit and Sahel districts.

In early 1983, the administration in Asmara made an estimate for the total number of casualties that had been incurred in the war since 1975. It estimated that 90,000 Ethiopian soldiers had been killed or wounded, together with 9,000 guerrillas. These figures are very credible. The estimated number of civilian casualties was almost unbelievably high: 280,000. In total, over 250,000 deaths were attributed to the war since its outbreak in 1961 (presumably including those due to hunger and displacement).¹⁹

During 1983/4, the Ethiopian army underwent its largest growth to date, surpassing 300,000 men. National military service, was announced in May

¹⁸ David A. Kom, *Ethiopia, the United States and the Soviet Union*, London, 1986, p. 82.

¹⁹ Dawit Wolde Giorgis, 1989, p. 113; *Africa Contemporary Record*, 1983-4, p. B133.

1983 and began to be implemented in January 1984, and the 60,000 new servicemen were trained and ready for service six months later. Further supplies of military equipment were provided by the USSR.

In early 1984, the EPLF went on the offensive, making some significant gains (the town of Tessenei was captured in January, causing the embarrassment to the UNHCR mission mentioned above). The government responded by another round of aerial bombardment, and by an offensive launched on 27 October (see chapter 10).

Bombing "Everything that Moves"

Major Bezabih Petros, a pilot who was trained at both Williams Air Force Base, Arizona, and Ligov Air Base in the USSR, was shot down and captured by the EPLF in April 1984. In captivity, he had this to say about the bombing:

We definitely know civilians will get hurt. But, knowing that the people sympathize with the rebels, the order is to bomb everything that moves.

In July 1979, Dan Connell witnessed the bombing of a group of pastoral semi-nomads on migration. Two women and a boy were hurt in the attack, together with five camels hurt, and one killed. Connell commented that the family group could not possibly have been mistaken for a military target.

An important element in the government's bombing strategy was instilling fear in the civilian populations. The bombing, and the measures needed to cope with it, such as living by night, posed enormous practical problems and were demoralizing for the civilian population. An Eritrean refugee woman in Sudan explained why she had left her country: "I was tired. I wanted just to walk outside in daylight without needing to look into the sky and fear for my life and my children."²⁰ It was not even necessary for the aircraft to drop bombs in order to inspire fear. They only needed to screech overhead at unpredictable intervals to remind people of their deadly presence, and the need for constant vigilance.

These air raids not only caused direct physical damage to people, animals and material infrastructure, but damaged the very social, economic and even psychological fabric of society. The constant fear of bombing in EPLF-held and contested areas literally drove life underground. Everything, whether civilian or military, had to be camouflaged from air attack. Schools and hospitals were located in caves and under trees. Only essential

²⁰ Interviewed by Alex de Waal, Wad Sherifei, Sudan, February 1989.

movements occurred by day -- all wheeled transport and much agricultural activity had to take place at night. Markets had to be held at night. Animal herding, which requires vigilance in order to make sure animals do not stray and must be carried out during daylight became dangerous, and increasingly restricted to forested areas and twilight hours. Herders reported that the Ethiopian warplanes appeared to take particular delight in "hunting" camels.

Even people not physically wounded have been left with permanent psychological scars after bombardment. The survivors of air raids have described being distraught with grief, delirious with fear for days or even weeks, subject to sudden-onset panic attacks which leave them in a state of acute anxiety, or prone to ever-present fears during the daytime and nightmares during the darkness. Some children become frozen with terror at the mere sound of an airplane.

The Creation of Famine

The war in Eritrea was fought on an unprecedented scale between 1978 and 1984, with the 1982 campaign marking the worst point. The destruction and disruption caused by the war was instrumental in creating the famine which developed, though a number of aspects of the situation prevented the famine from becoming as severe as in neighboring Tigray.

Famine occurs when a society no longer becomes socially and economically viable. In Eritrea in the 1980s, this occurred on account of:

- (1) the direct destruction caused by war;
- (2) the restrictions on economic activities caused by war and the other counter-insurgency measures;
- (3) the degradation of the natural environment, which was caused in part by war and counter-insurgency measures; and
- (4) rainfall failure.

This section will look at items (2) and (3); item (1) has essentially been covered, and item (4) -- the repeated partial or complete failure of the rains, starting with the winter rains of 1980/1 -- lies beyond the scope of this report.

The Impact of War and Counter-Insurgency Measures

One of the most disruptive aspects of the war was that it caused much of the population of Eritrea to be displaced. By March 1982, there were 440,000 Eritreans in Sudan alone. In 1983/4, a further 120,000 fled to Sudan, though many later returned. The 1985 offensives caused a further 190,000 to be displaced inside Eritrea, and 30,000 to flee to Sudan.

The policy of relocation in protected villages caused severe disruption to the livelihoods of farmers and herders.

Andu Kifle is a pastoralist-farmer from the small village of Adi-Werhi in Eritrea's Hamassien plateau. Andu and his two adult sons, Mehari and Keleta, used to take advantage of the winter rains (November-February) by moving their livestock to the *bahri* (green belt [down the escarpment close to the Red Sea]), 140 km east of Adi-Werhi where the rest of the family remained. Farming on the mainly state-owned *dominale* land in the green belt, Andu and his sons would get a reasonable harvest in February and March and return to Adi-Werhi by April, bringing sacks of grain, butter, ghee [clarified butter] and salt as rewards for their labour ...

At the onset of the May rains, one son would return to the green belt to collect the pair of draught oxen left with relatives. From May until October the whole family was busy cultivating in their plateau village. After the harvest and a few months' rest, the farming cycle started again.

This was the case until 1985, when Andu Kifle and his family, along with several hundred villagers from surrounding areas, were transferred to a new security hamlet called Inwet, where movement is restricted to a 10 km radius. Their whole agricultural system and pattern of life broke down. Andu sums up the feelings of many peasants: "We are like voiceless prisoners in these security hamlets. We have some oxen but not the land to plough, we have the cattle but we cannot graze freely. What choice do we have other than to starve?"²¹

In western Eritrea, many farmers were similarly forced to abandon seasonal farming on the flood-retreat of the Gash river. Many farmers

²¹ Zeremariam Fre, "The Legacy of War," in PANOS, *Greenwar: Environment and Conflict*, London, 1991, pp. 140-1.

were thus able to harvest only one crop per year instead of two, and many herders were forced to abandon their established practices of seasonal migration for grazing. In addition, many areas were rendered unusable by trenches, fortifications, free-fire zones, and land mines. A survey in 1987 found that land had been mined in almost ten per cent of the villages covered, and that two huge areas in Sahel and Akele Guzai had been rendered completely off-limits by mining.²²

Overall Impact of the War on Food Availability

In 1987, a team from the University of Leeds visited Eritrea, from both sides, and calculated the food production of the territory, and the constraints upon it.²³ The team found that Eritrea was, even in normal times, a food deficit area. They estimated that in a "normal, non-war" year the production of staple foods would be enough to feed the population for between seven and seven and a half months. In a "normal, war" year that figure fell to 4.6-4.8 months. This implies that the war was costing between 65,000 and 95,000 metric tonnes of lost food production per year - about half of the normal food deficit.

Impact on the Grain Trade

Normally, Eritrea's food deficit is made good by trade. The grain trade was severely disrupted by the war. Up to 1975, much of highland Eritrea and the towns were fed by grain imports from Sudan and the surplus-producing areas of western Tigray. Over the following decade, there were constant interruptions to one or other trade route.²⁴

In 1975 the war interrupted the supply route from Sudan. In 1977, export from Tigray was stopped by the insecurity there and the flight of large Tigrayan landowners to Sudan. Fortunately, supplies from Sudan re-started shortly afterwards. During 1977/8, the key route to Sudan was

²² Lionel Cliffe, "The Impact of the War and the Response to it in Different Agricultural Systems in Eritrea," *Development and Change*, 20, 1989, p. 378.

²³ Lars Bondestam, Lionel Cliffe and Philip White, "Eritrea: Food and Agricultural Production Assessment Study, Final Report," Leeds, 1988.

²⁴ The following information derives largely from interviews with grain traders conducted in Kassala, Sudan, in March and April 1989 by Alex de Waal.

almost completely controlled by the ELF,²⁵ which ensured physical security, but the ELF issued very few permits for cross-border trade in grain, restricting the number of merchants who could operate and the amounts they could import.²⁶ In 1978/9, the ease of trade briefly improved with government control of the major routes. While the government never imposed the same level of restrictions on trade as it did further south, it did require all traders to move by escorted convoy. There was also, during 1980-2, increased security in western Tigray and exports to Eritrea resumed. Intermittent attempts by the TPLF to restrict the export of grain to Eritrea were ineffectual, and at most a 10% tax was levied. After the collapse of the ELF in 1980, there was increased banditry in western Eritrea, which compelled merchants to organize their own armed convoys. From 1981 onwards there was greater harassment of traders suspected of trading with Sudan. Greater restrictions on trade were imposed during the Red Star campaign, and in 1983 the heavy fighting in western Tigray interrupted supplies from there.

Markets in EPLF-held areas and transitional zones were accessible to civilians from government-held areas only at considerable risk. Mohamed Idris, a farmer in western Eritrea, explained:

When we return from here [an EPLF-held area] to our villages, we don't know what will happen to us, because there are spies who will be asking where we have gone. We have taken a risk to come here. In order not to be killed, we will have to lie and say we travelled to Kassala [Sudan] to get food. The enemy looks after us like goats -- our whole living situation depends on tricking the enemy.

When we are away from our homes like this, we fear for our women. The Dergue rapes and harasses our women. But what can we do?²⁷

Women play a key role in the economic life of rural Eritrea. Petty trading, short-distance migrant labor and other activities done by women are key to a household's income in times of stress. As is clear from the quotation above, fear for the safety of women greatly constrained what

²⁵ Only the town of Barentu remained in government hands.

²⁶ There is speculation that the profits which accrued to a small cartel of traders from this practice were an important source of finance for the ELF.

²⁷ Quoted in: Barbara Hendrie, "Field Report -- Eritrea," Emergency Relief Desk, Khartoum, April 1986, Appendix B.

they were willing or able to do, with resulting loss of income and food to the family.

These disruptions had serious consequences for access to food in many parts of Eritrea. The price of food rose as a result, and the poor suffered.

The Impact on the Natural Environment

Eritrea is a semi-arid area, with a fragile ecosystem. The farmers and herders of the territory had evolved a range of strategies to be able to ensure, so far as possible, a sustainable livelihood. The pressures of sustained land use, exacerbated by rainfall failure, was already putting pressure on Eritrea's natural resource base. The war contributed to this process of degradation of the environment in a number of ways:

- * Trees were cut to make trenches, gun emplacements and village fortifications. The EPLF enacted a ban on the cutting of live trees, but it is unclear to what extent this was enforced. The loss of trees not only directly created deforestation, but forced pastoralists to browse their animals on other and possibly less suitable trees, causing further loss of tree cover.
- * Large areas of forest in the district of Semhar were burned by the army. The rationale for this was that the forests allowed guerrillas to approach the strategic Asmara-Massawa and Afabet-Massawa roads without being seen.
- * Eucalyptus woods at Biet Giorgis around Asmara and some other towns were cut down for the same reason.
- * The interruption of the charcoal and firewood trade from southwestern parts of Eritrea led to people obtaining wood fuel from their own localities.
- * The blocking of migration routes used by animal herders forced the herders to keep their animals in one area throughout the whole year, putting additional stress on the pasture and browse of these areas. The same factor caused herders to switch to farming, which places more stress on the land.
- * Large areas of land were rendered unusable by land mines, forcing farmers to cultivate other areas instead, and forcing herders to move

their animals elsewhere. These other areas were usually less suitable and more vulnerable to degradation.

- * The general impoverishment caused by war forced larger numbers of people to engage in marginal economic activities such as selling firewood or the leaves of *doum* palms (which are used for making mats), which are destructive of the natural environment.

Military engagements themselves also caused havoc to the environment. For example, a fighter's description of the battle of Elabored, south of Keren, in November 1978, indicates the level of destruction wrought in the valley where the battle was fought:

[Elabored] was full of tanks, dead bodies and trucks from edge to edge. All the dry grass was burned totally, and rows of trees were [knocked] down from the tanks. The planes never stopped coming. They were dropping different types of bomb including napalm [or phosphorous], and at times the valley was so filled with smoke you couldn't even see.²⁸

Every traveller to Eritrea has seen trees burned by phosphorous bombs or with limbs blown off by cluster bombs or high explosives.

Humanitarian Assistance

There was relatively little humanitarian assistance to Eritrea during this period. International aid to ERA fell from \$2.9 million in 1978 to \$1.6 million in 1979, and only \$1 million in 1980. Food relief was supplied at a rate of under 6,000 tons per year. These amounts were pitifully small compared to the level of need. Assistance on the government side was scarcely more generous, but Eritrea had the advantages of containing both of Ethiopia's ports, and being a sensitive political area and thus a priority for much government economic aid.

Relief was distributed in such a manner as to ensure greater control over the population. From 1982 onwards, it was made increasingly difficult for rural people to cross from government- to EPLF-held areas for relief. In government relief centers, "applicants are accepted only if they come as complete families, and then they receive rations [sufficient] for only

²⁸ Quoted in *Horn of Africa*, 4.1, 1981, p. 22.

such small periods that any hope of returning to their own villages with some food is illusory."²⁹

Factors Ameliorating the Famine

Rural Eritrea suffered from deepening famine during 1982-4. However, according to most indicators, Eritrea did not succumb to famine as severely as Tigray or north Wollo. There was less distress migration and, apart from the refugee camps in Sudan, there were none of the appalling relief shelters that were common further south. A later investigation found little evidence for raised death rates during the famine period, though other demographic signs of famine such as a lower birth rate showed up clearly.³⁰

A number of factors accounted for the lesser severity of the famine. One factor was that although Eritrea is drier than the neighboring provinces to the south, the relative shortfall in rain during 1982-4 was less. The climatic adversity suffered by the rural people was therefore less severe.

A second factor was that the war was fought as a positional war -- with well-defined zones held by the contending armies -- rather than a classic guerrilla war, so that outside the areas directly affected by fighting, the population was subjected to relatively less harassment. A third factor is that the war actually brought some economic benefits. The reconstruction element of the Red Star campaign significantly boosted urban employment. The army in Eritrea was paid relatively well and regularly, and Eritrean towns received their quotas of consumer goods on schedule. Shopkeepers in garrison towns such as Keren and Anseba reported doing a brisk trade in watches, cassette recorders, coffee and clothes, mainly selling to soldiers.³¹ Army officers benefitted from the flow of contraband goods from Sudan and Saudi Arabia, and the parallel currency market that grew up around the flow of expatriate Eritreans' remittances back home. While growing rich, the officers tolerated this informal market. This relative prosperity for traders trickled down to certain sections of society, including the traders' relatives, domestic servants, house builders and others.

²⁹ Fritz Eisenloeffel, *The Eritrea Durrah Odyssey*, Utrecht, the Netherlands, 1983, p. 38.

³⁰ Alex de Waal, "Population and Health of Eritreans in Wad Sherifei," ActionAid, London, 1989.

³¹ Alex de Waal, interviews in Wad Sherifei, Sudan, March 1989.

Finally, as the famine deepened in 1985, the amounts of aid provided to Eritrea became very large. The aid on the government side was tied to the continuing counter-insurgency strategy, but it did have the positive benefit of actually feeding some people.

Despite these factors, the famine of 1983-5 in Eritrea must not be minimized. It caused massive and avoidable suffering and impoverishment among most sections of the rural population, and led to many deaths.

8. COUNTER-INSURGENCY AND FAMINE IN TIGRAY AND ITS BORDERLANDS, 1980-84

In October 1984, the world was shocked by a film made by the BBC and Visnews in Meqele (Tigray), and Korem (on the Tigray-Wollo border). The pictures of a mass of destitute people, starving with a quiet dignity, revealed a "Biblical famine" in the late 20th century. The famine had of course been developing for several years with little attention from the outside world -- that was part of the horror of the story, which pricked the conscience of the affluent west. This and the following chapter recount the central story of how those images of mass starvation, and the wider famine which they represented, came about.

Grinding poverty and an unpredictable climate played their part in creating the tragic pictures of October 1984. The social and agricultural policies of the Ethiopian government were also important, and will be analyzed in the next chapter. However, at the center of the famine -- Tigray and north Wollo -- the counter-insurgency strategy of the Ethiopian army was the single most important reason why the drought of 1983-4 became not a "normal" period of hardship but a famine of a severity and extent unparalleled for a century.

The counter-insurgency strategy followed in Tigray in the early 1980s was different from that pursued in the southeast and in Eritrea. Starting in August 1980, it involved a greater level of indiscriminate violence against the civilian population, and there was no attempt to provide even the most minimal level of compensatory assistance to the stricken population. When the level of brutality and destruction increased in early 1983, famine developed directly.

The Ethiopian famine of 1983-5 was both "wide" -- it affected a very large area -- and "deep" -- there were places of exceptional severity. The famine first hit in southern Tigray and north Wollo, and spread outward. At the nadir, up to a third of the country was gripped by famine. The original center was the most severely hit, where the greatest depths of famine were plumbed.

Drought and Famine, 1983-85: An Outline

The most remarkable fact about the famine of 1983-5 in Ethiopia was that, by the time the drought struck, the famine was already well under way.

Every year, somewhere in northern Ethiopia, there is a harvest failure due to poor rains and a food shortage, and people go hungry (see chapter 1). If there is a humanitarian agency working in the vicinity, calls for help

will be sounded, but this does not amount to widespread or unusual famine. It is important, therefore, to distinguish the "normal" alarms for localized distress from the "abnormal" alarms that accompany the development of a major famine. We contend here that the droughts of 1980-3 were unremarkable; that localized surpluses existed; and that if normal processes of redistribution of food had been allowed to occur, there would have been no famine. 1984 was a drought year of unusual severity, it is true -- but had the famine not already been in train, and had the artificial famine-creating actions not continued, major famine could have been averted.

Starting in 1980, the "normal" alarms began to sound, varying in severity over the following three years. The Relief Society of Tigray (REST, working with the TPLF), the government RRC, and voluntary agencies sounded these alarms. In late 1982, the alarms became more urgent.

In February 1983, however, there was a change from a severe but "normal" cry for help to the warning of a major famine. British relief agencies made a major appeal on February 16. This cry for help arose because relief agencies working in the relief shelters of Korem and Ibat (central Gonder) were suddenly receiving a large inflow of destitute and malnourished migrants. Attributed at the time to drought, the flow of destitute migrants was in fact a direct result of the war (see below).

There is no evidence for harvest failures in northern Ethiopia over the period from 1980 to early 1983 sufficient to cause severe famine.

No reliable figures are available for rural production in Tigray and the adjoining areas. National figures for Ethiopia are available, however:

Table 1. Food Production in Ethiopia, 1977-84.¹

	Production: total	per head
1977	99	95
1978	110	104
1979	122	113
1980	117	106
1981	115	102
1982	127	110
1983	118	99
1984	110	90

Note: 1974-76 = 100

¹ Source: FAO Production Yearbooks. Also see: Bob Baulch, "Entitlements and the Wollo Famine of 1982-1985," *Disasters*, 11.3, 1987, p. 196, where a seven per cent higher production figure is given for 1983.

Not only do these figures fail to indicate any crisis until 1984, but they show that 1982 and 1983 were, nationally, bumper crops -- two of the best on record, and above or equal to the long-term average. There were of course regional shortages, but the simplistic explanation of the famine as a prolonged drought-induced food shortage does not hold up.²

The RRC produces estimates of the size of the crop and the availability of food after each harvest. These are always pessimistic, as it is the job of the RRC to identify deficits and appeal for aid. (Surveying the same area, the Agricultural Marketing Corporation (AMC), with a brief to identify surpluses, usually produces a much more optimistic picture.)

After the 1980 harvest, food availability in Tigray, Wollo and Gonder was "normal."³ 1981 was better. The main 1981 report identified surpluses in the usual areas: Raya (eastern Tigray), Kobo (north Wollo), Borena (south Wollo), Simien (north Gonder), central Gonder, and Gojjam.⁴ No assessment was made for western Tigray, but surpluses existed there too. For 1982, the reports for Wollo were encouraging -- food shortages were localized, and most of the highlands was normal.⁵ Eastern Gonder was suffering drought, but the main surplus-producing areas were less affected.⁶ In early 1982, Tigray was described as "encouraging," and in late 1982 as "poor," but no surveys were done -- the main measure used was the

² Attempts to argue the reverse are based on assumptions that the data are faulty. See for example: Gopu Kumar, "Ethiopian Famines 1973-1985: A Case Study," in J. Dreze and A. Sen, *The Political Economy of Hunger, Vol. II*, Oxford, 1990. Kumar is forced to argue back from "what we know about the progress of the famine" to the "defensible assumption" of a catastrophic fall in food output, which is not shown in the figures (p. 198).

³ RRC, "Food Supply Status and Forecast by Administrative Region," Addis Ababa, November 1980.

⁴ RRC, "Food Supply System: Meher Synoptic Report, 1973/74 EC [Ethiopian Calendar] (1981) Crop Season," Addis Ababa, March 1982.

⁵ RRC, "Report on a Reconnaissance Trip in Wollo Administrative Region, (August 11-September 4, 1982)," November 1982; RRC, "Meher Synoptic Report 1974/75 EC (1982) Crop Season," March 1983.

⁶ RRC, "A Report on a Reconnaissance Trip to Gonder Administrative Region (October 6 - November 6, 1982)" Addis Ababa, November 1982.

price of grain in Meqele town.⁷ Later in this chapter it will be shown how government policy helped to cause the price rise over this period. A survey done among Tigrayan refugees in Sudan in 1985 found that "their highest yields in the last ten years occurred in 1982-83."⁸

In April 1983, the RRC issued a revised report for the 1982 main season. This was much more alarming in tone -- despite the fact that no new information had been collected about the 1982 harvest in the north. Grain prices had shot up, and the RRC inferred that major shortages existed.⁹ The real reasons for the change in tone were probably that a famine had started, and the RRC needed to identify a drought to blame it upon.

The main 1983 season provides the first significant evidence for widespread crop failure. But even at this stage, the failure was confined to most of Tigray and some parts of north Wollo. In Gonder, the food supply situation *improved* in 1983, with substantial surpluses in Gonder Zuria, Chilga, Debre Tabor, and Simien. In most of Wollo the food supply remained normal.¹⁰ The RRC had no data for Tigray, but a relief agency team visiting TPLF areas reported surpluses in Shire and Raya, though all other areas had suffered harvest failures.¹¹

Almost universal drought first occurred in the spring of 1984, affecting the *belg* harvest. *Belg* crops produce only a small proportion of the food produced in the north -- about one quarter in the areas where the *belg* rains fall, and none at all in 90% of Tigray. The *belg* failure was serious, but should not have caused undue problems in the light of the average crop performance over the previous few years, and the bumper national harvest.

⁷ RRC, "Food Supply Status and Forecast by Administrative Region", March 1982, and "Food Supply Status and Forecast No. 1," December 1982.

⁸ Cultural Survival, *Politics and the Ethiopian Famine 1984-1985*, Cambridge, Mass., 1985, p. 192.

⁹ RRC, "Food Supply Status and Forecast No. 2 (Oct-Dec [1982])," April 1983.

¹⁰ RRC, "Food Supply Status and Forecast," March 1984 (based on data from late 1983); RRC, "Meher Synoptic Report 1976/76 EC (1983) Crop Season," January 1984. The surplus in Simien was identified by REST.

¹¹ John English, Jon Bennett, Bruce Dick and Caroline Fallon, "Tigray 1984: An Investigation," Oxfam, January 1984, p. 62. The team reported that Raya had reaped a surplus of 8-10,000 tons despite a one-season drought in the area, implying that the surpluses of previous years were much larger.

But the RRC played up the *belg* failure, telling blatant untruths into the bargain: "The highlands of Wollo, Bale and Shewa are the major *belg* producing areas. *Belg* accounts for at least half of the annual production in most parts of these areas. There are also areas in most of the remaining regions which heavily depend on *belg*, particularly in Tigray ..."¹²

Rainfall data are very scarce -- for years they were concealed by the government. No data are available for places in Tigray, but some are available for Kobo, in north Wollo, which is close to the heart of the famine zone. These data confirm that the drought only began in late 1983. The following table shows the rainfall for the *belg* (February–May) and *meher* (July–October) seasons in Kobo.

Table 2. Rainfall in Kobo, North Wollo.¹³

	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987
<i>Belg</i>	268	117	233	118	NA	168	270	19	214	174	331
<i>Meher</i>	460	352	497	499	646	362	150	51	243	450	233

All amounts in millimeters.

Further south, a similar picture can be seen in the fragmentary climatic data that are available. Some rainfall stations in Wollo recorded a drought in 1983, others recorded a good year. An example of the latter is Bati, where the famine of 1984/5 was very severe -- but where rainfall in 1983 was the highest for more than 15 years.¹⁴

Satellite imagery of vegetation also indicates that the spring (*belg*) harvest of 1983 was likely to have been normal. Thus we see that the drought started only *after* the famine was set in train. The reason why rainfall data have been kept as state secrets now becomes clearer.

¹² RRC, "The *Belg* Rain Failure and Its Effect on Food Production, Special Report," May 1984.

¹³ Derived from: Alemneh Dejene, *Environment, Famine, and Politics in Ethiopia: A View from the Village*, Boulder, Co., 1990, p. 84.

¹⁴ Alemneh Dejene, 1990, p. 57.

Both rainfall data and satellite imagery confirm that the main 1983 season was satisfactory in Gonder, implying the existence of the substantial surpluses normally produced in that province.

1984 was a year of almost complete drought, lasting the whole year and affecting a wide area. Production in Wollo was only 28% of 1983; in Gonder it was 86% (no figures are available for Tigray). It was the results of this drought that observers saw when they visited the region in late 1984 -- dry fields, withered crops, waterless wells. The fact is, however, that a visitor can only see a single year of drought, and that is not enough to cause famine. The drought of 1984 was used as a scapegoat for a famine that had begun much earlier.

In 1982 and 1983, the localized drought in Tigray was most severe on the eastern escarpment. But the population hit hardest by the famine originated in southern Tigray and northern Wollo, and was to be found scattered in places such as Shire, Ibnat and Korem -- another indicator that climate was not the fundamental cause of the disaster.

Another indicator of famine is grain prices. High grain prices indicate a scarcity in the market. The following table shows the approximate average grain prices during the famine period.

Table 3. Grain Prices in Northern Ethiopia¹⁵

	East Tigray	North Wollo	North Gonder
Nov/Dec 1981	100	50	40
Nov/Dec 1982	165	65	55
Nov/Dec 1983	225	90	45
Nov/Dec 1984	300	160	70
Jun/Jul 1985	380	235	165

All prices in Birr per quintal (100 kg)

Prices rose to reach famine levels in Tigray in late 1982, but only rose to comparable levels in Wollo between February and August 1984, and in Gonder in mid-1985. Throughout 1983, prices in Wollo were stable -- in some markets they actually fell. These prices are not consistent with

¹⁵ Derived from data in: Alex de Waal, "Tigray: Grain Markets and Internal Purchase," Oxfam, 1990, p. 44; Peter Cutler, "The Development of the 1983-85 Famine in Northern Ethiopia," PhD thesis, London, 198; Baulch, 1987, p. 199.

the account that stresses repeated and widespread drought. They are consistent with highly localized famine in Tigray, spreading out into neighboring areas in 1984 and 1985.

By 1984 the famine had deepened to such an extent in Tigray and north Wollo that its effects were being felt far away. The high grain prices at the epicenter of the famine were forcing up prices elsewhere, putting food out of the reach of the poor. Increasing animal sales were pushing livestock prices down, and migrants were flooding the labor markets. The famine had acquired a momentum of its own and began to spread, helped by the coercive and restrictive social and agricultural policies of the government.

The drought and accompanying crop failures cannot explain the famine. To understand why it occurred it is necessary to turn to an account of the conduct of the war in Tigray.

The TPLF

The TPLF, from its inception, fought a classic guerrilla insurgency. It refused to defend any territory, and instead relied on being able to move among the population "like a fish through water." Espousing a mix of Tigrayan nationalism — for instance calling itself the "second *Weyane*," referring to the rebellion of 1943 — and radical politics, the TPLF soon came to have the tacit support of most of the rural population. The Red Terror was waged with particular savagery in Tigray and drove much of the urban population to support the rebels. The TPLF took advantage of the government's military preoccupation with the Ogaden and Eritrea to operate throughout rural Tigray during 1978/9. It set up a wide network of councils, instigated land reform, and began some health care and development projects.

In 1976, the TPLF took several European hostages, including a British family of four and a journalist. It demanded a ransom of \$1 million for the British family, but eventually released them after eight months captivity after pressure was brought to bear by the Sudan government.

From 1980 onwards, the TPLF claimed to control 85 per cent of Tigray. Because of the TPLF's guerrilla strategy, the government army was able to launch offensives into almost every part of the province, and thus make a counter-claim of having access everywhere. The two claims are both true: TPLF fighters could move almost anywhere at will, with the support of most of the people, and the army could, by force, reach most places, but not hold them.

In 1980, the TPLF began to form militias throughout the countryside. This was partly in response to demands from the villagers to have arms to protect themselves from the casual and repeated violence of army patrols,

and partly in order to take the war to the government throughout the province. In 1982, the TPLF launched its "Southern Operation" and opened a new front in southern Tigray and northern Wollo. It followed the formation of the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (EPDM) a year previously. Tamrat Layne was a prominent leader of the EPDM, which started as a breakaway group of the EPRP. Always a close ally of the TPLF, the EPDM was militarily active in Wollo and Gonder.

In 1982, the TPLF and EPDM started mounting major operations in Wollo. A year later, *Africa Confidential* noted that "the TPLF and EPDM are able to hit the whole length of the Dessie-Meqele road."¹⁶ In March 1983, a joint TPLF-Afar Liberation Front (ALF) attack overran Bati, on the eastern escarpment of southern Wollo. In April, TPLF-EPDM forces occupied Lalibella, the historic site of rock-hewn churches in central Wollo, and kidnapped relief workers in Korem. Seqota, district headquarters of Wag, was occupied. In September, joint TPLF-EPDM operations extended as far south as Wichale, Jarre and Haik, close to Dessie. Eleven Swiss relief workers were kidnapped in Jarre and later released. In August 1984, TPLF-ALF attacks were mounted near Mille, in eastern Wollo, and in October Lalibella was captured again. On each occasion the army appeared to be taken unawares by the attack, indicating that the rebels were able to move with ease among the local population. In response, many elements of the counter-insurgency strategy were applied throughout northern and central Wollo and Gonder, not merely in Tigray.

Until about 1986, the TPLF had virtually no heavy weapons and no "base area." It had a core army of an estimated 7,000-15,000 men, and a much larger number of militiamen. The EPDM was a smaller force.

Counter-Population Warfare by the Government

The nature of the rebellion in Tigray led to a new variation on the army's counter-insurgency strategies. These strategies were instrumental in setting the famine in train. There were three main aspects:

- * Large scale military offensives, aimed at the surplus-producing Shire district. The Sixth Offensive of the Ethiopian army in Tigray was launched in August 1980 and continued until March 1981. The Seventh Offensive was fought from February to April 1983. (An eighth was fought from February to May 1985.)

¹⁶ *Africa Confidential*, 24.19, September 21, 1983, p. 4.

- * Aerial bombardment of markets. This started in 1980 and was intensified in early 1982 to coincide with the Red Star campaign in Eritrea, and remained at a high level thereafter.
- * Tight controls on movement of migrants and traders, enforced in all garrison towns, in eastern Tigray and northern Wollo. These controls were introduced in late 1980 and widened over the following two years. In 1982 restrictions were tightened in Wollo. In 1984 they were enforced particularly strictly, with widespread detentions of suspected TPLF sympathizers, and were extended to many parts of Gonder.

The logic behind the government's strategy was "draining the sea to catch the fish." This amounted to counter-population warfare. Because of its actions during 1976-9, the government had alienated all significant sections of the populace, and could locate no secure base from which to start a pacification strategy. As a result, the army engaged in counter-population warfare. The increasing hostility of the population towards the army combined with increasing TPLF military successes, causing the army to become more demoralized and more brutal.

The three elements of the military strategy combined to prevent the normal redistribution of surpluses within northern Ethiopia. The offensives effectively destroyed or made unavailable most of the surpluses in Shire in 1980 and 1983. The bombing and the restrictions on movement prevented the mobilization of the Raya surpluses from 1980 onwards, becoming particularly severe in 1984; in 1983 the restrictions prevented much trade in Wollo and in 1984 in Gonder. The result was that peasants in the deficit areas of eastern Tigray and Tembien-Wag were unable to provision themselves from the adjoining areas, and began to suffer famine.

The following sections will look in detail at each of the three aspects.

Counter-Insurgency 1980-84: I. Military Campaigns

In January and February 1980, a punitive expedition by the army burned several villages in north-central Tigray. Credible reports indicate that 130 civilians were killed in Mai Kenetal. The village of Aweger was destroyed, and when villagers from nearby Haile tried to help the inhabitants rebuild, the army killed 51 of them and briefly imprisoned over 800. More than 300 civilians were killed in the entire operation. However, major military action only occurred later in the year.

On August 22, 1980, the army launched its Sixth Offensive in central Tigray. This marked a change in military strategy, and the beginnings of widespread counter-population warfare. In the midst of the offensive,

Africa Confidential commented with remarkable prescience: "A consequence of the fighting is likely to be widespread famine."¹⁷ *Africa Confidential* only got the time frame wrong, and underestimated the resilience of the Tigrayan peasants -- the famine took another two years to develop.

The offensive involved widespread military action over the following seven months. 40,000 troops were involved, together with aircraft and helicopter gunships¹⁸ -- a small force by later standards, but enough to create major disruptions in the rural economy. Tembien, the center of the famine area in the following years, was worst hit.

During the campaign, the army engaged in a number of activities that directly affected the ability of the population to feed itself. These included:¹⁹

- * the destruction of grain stores: an estimated 6,000 tons of grain was burned by incendiary bombs or destroyed by soldiers;
- * the killing of cattle: REST estimated that 950 cattle were killed;
- * the burning of crops and pastures: 142,000 hectares of farmland was rendered useless in fighting in February-March 1981 alone by burning or trampling;
- * the enforced collection of taxes and contributions, often at a punitive level, ostensibly including "arrears;"
- * the forcible displacement of farmers: about 80,000 farmers in central Tigray were forced to leave their homes. 20,000 resettled themselves in western Tigray and 5,000 became refugees in Sudan. Many could not harvest in 1980, or had inadequate time to plough their fields for the 1981 rainy season.
- * destruction of villages: over 2,000 houses and five grinding mills were destroyed.

¹⁷ *Africa Confidential*, 21.24, November 26, 1980, p. 7.

¹⁸ Mi 24 helicopter gunships were deployed for the first time in Africa in this campaign.

¹⁹ Kirsty Wright, "Famine in Tigray: An Eyewitness Account," London, REST Support Committee, 1983, p. 7.

Abi Adi had been occupied by the TPLF since August 1978; on September 11, 1980, it was attacked by the army using helicopters. Many houses were burned and much of the population was forced to flee; four people were killed. On September 29, a number of towns and villages in central Tigray were attacked by airplanes and helicopters, and, according to one report, 27 people were killed.²⁰

After the campaign finished, the government had established a network of garrisons throughout the province, many of them in important towns for local trade. Abi Adi is one such town, critical for the trade between the surplus-producing Simien district of Gonder and the deficit areas of Meqele and Agame. For twelve months after the offensive there was a garrison at Abi Adi, which was able to enforce the restrictions on migration and trade discussed in the next section. Some of these garrisons were withdrawn in 1981 and 1982, under pressure from the TPLF. Regular patrols continued, and civilians were subjected to harassment, robbery and execution.

In a series of attacks in August and September 1981, over 400 people were killed by soldiers and airplanes. For example, on August 26, the village of Mezega was burned. 14 villagers were killed and 400 cattle slaughtered.²¹

The opening of the Red Star offensive in Eritrea in February 1982 saw widespread bombing and an increase in army attacks in Tigray. Patrols in southern Tigray became more frequent in response to the TPLF's "Southern Operation."

In one of many retaliatory attacks, on this occasion following a TPLF ambush, soldiers burned a village near Adi Gudud, killing two women and seven children who remained behind in their huts.²²

The end of 1982 saw preparations for the Seventh Offensive, which was to be the most brutal to date. A month before the ground attack started, helicopters and MiG fighter bombers started "softening up" the towns and villages to be attacked. In December 1982, helicopter-gunships bombed

²⁰ *Somali, Tigray and Oromo Resistance Monitor, (STORM), 1.2, March 1981, p. 6.*

²¹ Information compiled by Barbara Hendrie, an independent consultant.

²² *Africa Contemporary Record, 1982-3, p. B149.*

Abi Adi town for half an hour. According to a member of the *baito*, eighty houses were burned, "but only one person killed and a couple wounded."²³

The army offensive began in January, with attacks in central and western Tigray. Work on the harvest stopped at once, as people made preparations for concealing food and other items from the soldiers, and evacuating their villages if need be. Migrant workers moved to other areas. Civilians were killed by army raids near Axum, Enticho and Enda Selassie. On February 16, this escalated to a full-scale assault, involving 70,000 troops and all the familiar abuses against civilians -- summary executions, burning of villages, destruction of grain stores and the killing of cattle. The TPLF attempted to defend its base in Shire using trench warfare, but was forced to abandon the area. More than 100,000 farmers were forced to evacuate their homes, and many of the estimated 375,000 migrants in western Tigray were obliged to move to other areas to seek work.

The devastation was particularly severe in Shire -- a vital surplus producing area -- where on February 21 the army succeeded in capturing the town of Sheraro for the first time since the late 1970s. Before attacking the town, the army indiscriminately shelled it. Having occupied the town, the army systematically looted it, taking over 150 tons of grain, taking oil presses and grinding mills, together with burning other grain stores and fodder grass collected to feed to animals.²⁴ The health clinic was ransacked. A medical team from Medecins Sans Frontieres saw "thousands of hectares of land systematically burned, for example on the way from Sheraro to Kafta." The team also saw the Tekezze Agricultural Center, where soldiers had cut down the fruit trees and destroyed the irrigation system.

REST had established several centers to give assistance to famine migrants coming from central Tigray. Three of these -- Endabugna, Az Daro and Adi Nebreit -- were attacked.²⁵

A woman described the army's arrival in the village of Edaga Habret on March 9 and the preparations the people made for survival:

We heard that the army was coming at 2 a.m. in the morning from people who had run to our village from neighboring settlements where

²³ Woreda Teka, interviewed by Gerry McCann and Sarah Vaughan, two visitors to Tigray in 1988.

²⁴ Wright, 1983, p. 8.

²⁵ Gayle Smith, "Counting Quintals: A Monitoring Report on Famine Relief in Tigray," The Hague, 1983, p. 19.

the army had already reached. Then around 6 a.m. we heard firing between the *kabrits* [TPLF scouts]. As soon as we heard the news, we tried to prepare foodstuffs for the future. You can't take *injera* [Ethiopian pancakes] for a long period of time as it breaks and dries. We roasted chick peas and cereals to make *qolo*, took the food and ran.... Two of us went up the mountain two hours away and we could look down and see the Dergue [soldiers]. First the troops lit one house using a match, then they took burning grass from house to house. All the houses were burned, houses belonging to 135 heads of families. Nobody stayed behind. We had tried to take important materials to the bushes surrounding the village, but these were discovered by the Dergue -- house materials, plates, jerry cans, soap, salt, sugar, pepper, cloth, sewing machines. Three sewing machines were destroyed and all seven oil presses were burned. My two beds were burned and the small garden destroyed. A lot of grass had been collected for feeding the animals for the summer ... it was all burned. Seven people were killed and 20 wounded in the area. We stayed for three days in the bushes and on the third day the troops left. There were so many of them that there was a two-and-a-half hour line of them marching out of the village. When we went back into our homes we found that all the grain in the village had been burned. I lost three sacks of sorghum and 12 sacks of sesame.²⁶

This was the second occasion the village had been destroyed by the army. On July 2 and 3, 1983, the village was bombed again, wounding two people and killing some sheep and camels.

The first major alarms for the famine were raised by relief agencies in February 1983, when large numbers of migrants started turning up in Korem and Ibnat looking for food.

The farmers I got a chance to talk to in Korem had come from around Seqota ... this stream of people looking for food had to go further afield than usual when the rains failed there and the autumn harvest was small. Some traipsed west all the way over to Gonder, where there was still agricultural work to be found in some places as late as November, before hurrying back to Wollo when distribution started there.²⁷

²⁶ Wright, 1983, p. 9.

²⁷ Judith Appleton, Save the Children Fund (UK) field report, April 1983.

Others had travelled to western Tigray before returning to Korem and Ibnat in February. What is important to note is that the migration to these areas was *normal*. It was not a preferred strategy -- the migrants would rather have stayed at home, had the food been available -- but the movement west did not itself signal anything unusual. The famine was set in train because the migration failed. It failed because of the havoc caused in Shire and the adjoining areas by the Seventh Offensive.

As before, the offensive resulted in a wider spread of garrisons throughout the province, and a large number of small atrocities followed. For example, there are credible reports of the army killing 20 civilians while burning villages near Hagere Selam, Shire, between June 17-26, 1983, and killing two more at Alage.²⁸

During and after 1983, rural people remember the behavior of soldiers as being more brutal than before, and this is confirmed by members of the armed forces. Lieutenant Yamani Hassan, a prisoner of war held by the TPLF, reported:²⁹

Civilians in the war zones have always been badly treated, but the brutality increased after the failure of the Red Star Campaign, in 1983. I can think of four incidents in Tigray I have witnessed. One was in Sinkatta where four men were questioned about the TPLF. They said they did not know anything, and they were then shot. Another time a 13 or 14 year old girl was raped. A third occasion was when soldiers went to a group of houses near the church in Hausien. Three old people came out, and the soldiers chose one and shot him. There was also a time when we were stationed at a village near Samre, and the villagers came and brought us roasted maize and beer. They treated us very well, probably hoping we would do the same to them. The order to leave came in the middle of the night, and the soldiers burned the whole village asleep in their beds as they left.

It is taken as read that these sorts of atrocities are all "part of the job." Anyone who questions them, or talks about what is done, is picked up by the "welfare" people.³⁰ The soldiers are trained to act like machines or animals and not have any thoughts of their own. There is no training

²⁸ *Africa Contemporary Record*, 1983-4, p. B136.

²⁹ Interviewed at Tade Azregar, Tigray, on December 1, 1988, by Sarah Vaughan and Gerry McCann.

³⁰ The security service within the army.

in torture techniques or anything like that: soldiers are just given boxes of matches and told to get on with it.

In July and August 1983, the army mounted operations in southern Tigray, in response to TPLF offensives. In November, the TPLF was active in northern Gonder, and its central command set up a temporary base in the Simien mountains, where food was more readily available than in central Tigray. The army responded with a series of sweeps through the area. These involved the burning of villages and mounds of harvested grain ready for threshing.³¹ There was a larger army assault on Simien in January 1984, followed by four other major attacks over the following eighteen months.

Starting in 1980, the government utilized paid bandits, locally known as *banda* or *shimeq*, to engage in sabotage and terrorism. In November 1981, there was a number of sabotage attacks in Sudanese refugee camps. Refugees who had returned briefly to Ethiopia reported being told by soldiers that they would be well-treated if they returned to Sudan to attack refugee camps.³²

Counter-Insurgency 1980-84: II. Bombing

From mid-1980 onwards, chronic day-in-day-out bombing began to occur in Tigray. Most of the large-scale atrocities by the air force were perpetrated by attacks made in conjunction with ground offensives. However, innumerable small attacks were made at all times. Airplanes just needed to "buzz" a village in order to send the people scurrying for shelter, and cease all activities for many hours.

The main target of the bombing in Tigray was the network of rural markets in TPLF-controlled areas. Medebai, a market near Axum which lies on the important Shire-Eritrea trade route, was bombed more than 100 times during the 1980s. Hausien, the most important market in northeast Tigray, was bombed equally often until it was completely destroyed in 1988. Welel, an important market which links Tembien, Raya and Wag, was also frequently bombed.

The market at Chilla, near Axum, was frequently bombed. The worst attacks occurred on March 3 and 5, 1983: A TPLF fighter described the scene:

³¹ *Africa Contemporary Record*, 1983-4, p. B137.

³² Ahmad Karadawi, "Refugee Policy in the Sudan, 1967-1984," DPhil thesis, Oxford, 1988, p. 193.

You cannot believe what you saw -- it was not something for anyone to see. The blood was flowing like rivers and sitting in pools, and there were crushed bodies thrown everywhere, the blood of the people was mixed with the blood of the animals that had been hit. You could see a head there but you couldn't find the body, it was thrown some meters away. The children were hysterical and screaming even after some hours -- the helicopters chased them and they couldn't get away. They cry now even if they hear a plane. If they have seen a massacre when they are only four or five years old, they will remember forever when they shut their eyes that they saw their mothers being killed.³³

A medical team from Medecins Sans Frontieres visited the town shortly afterwards and interviewed survivors:

Four helicopters blocked the exits from the market and machine-gunned the market place. MiGs then finished this "work." Even two weeks later we could still observe bomb splinters on the rocky ground and the smell was unbearable. The ground was strewn with various broken fragments, spilt cereals and corpses of donkeys. Everywhere there were traces of blood -- on the ground and on rocks where people had tried to escape. Here and there were the unknown graves of more than a hundred local people who had been massacred.

According to REST, 315 people were killed or wounded in this attack. At least nine other markets were bombed during the Seventh Offensive (between February and April 1983), causing at least 179 casualties.³⁴

Phosphorous bombs were frequently used in attacks on markets and villages, leaving horrible burns. Incendiary bombs were used to set fire to fields and stores.

A secondary target of the bombing was means of transport. Wheeled transport became too dangerous to use. Caravans of donkeys, mules or camels were frequently attacked. This forced traders to move at night, and to move in small and less visible groups (while the threat of bandits and saboteurs in some areas compelled them to do the opposite, and move in larger groups for self-protection). A peasant in central Tigray commented:

³³ Quoted in: Smith, 1983, pp. 100-1.

³⁴ Smith, 1983, p. 100.

Of course the government knows that we can't survive from month to month without a market. This is why the planes so often come and circle on market day. We all scatter as soon as they come, but even that causes problems: there are often thieves in the market place who steal the goods that people drop when they run away.³⁵

The inevitable result of the campaign against the markets and traders was that markets were forced to be held at night -- though the danger of early-morning attacks on market towns where people had gathered remained real. With no light other than candles and small gas lamps, the markets could become chaotic -- people could not see properly what they were buying, and vendors laid their goods out in the danger of them being trampled upon. Social gatherings, an important reason for many people attending market, were held less often. The TPLF regulated that all markets should be held on Saturday nights, so that it was not possible for the air force to bomb the market towns "in rotation," following the different market days. A negative result of this was that traders could not rotate between the markets. Unable to travel by day, larger traders were forced into long periods of idleness during daylight, making slow progress to attend perhaps just one small market per week. They would not store large amounts of goods in any one place, but scatter them in different stores, so as to minimize the danger of losing everything to bombing or a ground attack. Many traders were forced out of business. Markets thus contracted or were closed down altogether. Combined with the restrictions on trade and migration in government-controlled areas, the results were disastrous for trade and exchange.

Bombing was also used against villages, churches, schools, and farmers ploughing their land. Attacks appeared to be virtually random. In areas of greatest TPLF control, such as Shire, the bombing even forced people to cultivate at night.

Counter-Insurgency 1980-84: III. Restrictions on Movement

While the military campaigns of 1980-4 were restricted to Tigray and one small adjoining area of Gonder, the restrictions on movement encompassed a much larger area -- even further afield than the TPLF-EPDM's most southerly military actions. In terms of limiting movement and trade, the restrictions had a similar effect to the bombing campaign in TPLF areas.

³⁵ Interviewed by Sarah Vaughan

Restrictions on the Grain Trade

A particularly important counter-insurgency tactic was restriction on the grain trade. This was implemented from a variety of motivations, including the desire to restrict the movement of potential rebel sympathizers, desire to stem the flow of food to the TPLF, suspicion of traders in general (especially a fear that they might be smuggling arms) and a feeling that private grain trade was incompatible with socialism.

Since 1974 there had been legal prohibitions on certain commercial activities (see chapter 6), and local and ancillary legislation meant that local administrators were able to harass petty traders at will and confiscate their goods. From 1980 these restrictions were intensified in central Tigray, and in 1982, they were extended to southern Tigray and northern Wollo. Until then, Meqele obtained most its food from Raya and north Wollo; this helps to explain the price rise in Meqele during that year. It became more difficult for traders to obtain licenses, and they were subjected to an increasing range of taxes. The use of wheeled transport for trade into contested or TPLF-held areas was impossible -- everything had to be "smuggled" by pack animals, at a cost of 3-10 times as much per item carried.

Road blocks were set up at the entrances to all towns, to prevent unauthorized trade. In addition, one of the functions of army checkpoints on roads was to control the trade in grain. The soldiers also took advantage of their position to extract bribes from traders, in effect taxing all movement of grain.

Small traders entering towns were sometimes forced to sell their grain at the government-controlled prices, which were very low, or were required to pay tax arrears before being allowed to enter the market.

When possible, rural people prefer to take grain into towns in order to have it ground into flour by mechanical mills, rather than having to do it by hand. Regulating access to flour mills became one way the government restricted the movement of food. When occupying towns and villages, the army also regularly destroyed flour mills and essential trading equipment such as weighing scales.

The TPLF also tried to restrict the flow of grain to the towns, so as not to deprive the countryside, but it attempted to facilitate the rural-rural trade in grain.

Impact of the Restrictions: The Example of Tembien

These restrictions combined to prevent the movement of grain and were therefore instrumental in creating famine.

In Tigray, these restrictions were invoked most severely in eastern Tigray, especially the surplus-producing area of Raya, for the reason that these were the areas where the government had most control. Proposals by REST to send small traders to the area to buy the available surplus for relief purposes came to nothing. In the adjacent areas of Kobo, Wag, Tembien and Enderta, prices rose to previously-unrecorded highs.

In 1984, there were very tight restrictions on trade in northern Gonder. These were related to an upsurge in TPLF-EPDM activity north of Gonder and repeated army offensives aimed at dislodging the TPLF positions in the Simien mountains, as well as a number of factors not associated with the insurgency (see the following chapter).

In late 1983, the farmers of Simien had been selling between 300 and 400 tons of grain in Tembien every week.³⁶ Had this trade continued throughout the dry season, at least 10,000 tons would have moved into the drought zone by this one route alone. Instead, the trade was completely blocked by the army.

What happened to the 8,000-10,000 tons surplus in Raya, or the 10,000-15,000 surplus in Simien, is not known -- much of it probably rotted or was fed to animals. It is known that in 1984 Tembien, which lay right between these two surplus areas, was probably the worst-hit famine zone in the whole country.

The largest surpluses in Tigray were found in Shire. Bombing of markets and army control of the trade routes into central Tigray effectively prevented any of this reaching the drought zone -- which was in turn one reason why people from central Tigray migrated westward.

General Impact of Restrictions and Bombing of Markets

More generally, the restrictions increased vulnerability to famine throughout northern Ethiopia.

In normal circumstances, the grain market consisted of an integrated network of local markets. When the price rose in one area, traders would buy food in markets where it could be had more cheaply, and move it there -- both supplying food to the area and so bringing the price down, and providing a market for farmers in surplus areas. This was no longer occurring in northern Ethiopia in the 1980s. When the price rose in one locality, there was almost nothing to restrain it. Analyses of the level of

³⁶ English *et al.*, 1984, p. 72.

integration of the market reveal that there was almost no local trade in north Wollo and Tigray.³⁷

The most immediate impact of the government policy of restricting rural access to the towns was to increase grain prices in the towns. In 1982, the price of sorghum in TPLF-held Sheraro was 45 Birr per quintal (100kg); in nearby government-held Enda Selassie the price was 130–160 Birr per quintal.³⁸ As the policy became entrenched and the bombing campaign became established, rural–rural trade was disrupted too. In Meqele, the price of grain in December 1982 was 181 Birr per quintal; in nearby areas controlled by the TPLF there was either none available or it ranged from 140–200 Birr. In Shire it was 60 Birr and in north Wollo 40–90 Birr. If unrestricted trade had been possible, the surpluses in the latter two areas would have been taken to Meqele, at a transport cost of about 47 Birr and 23 Birr per quintal respectively.³⁹ The price in Meqele would have fallen to 120 Birr and probably less. (If access from Sudan or Gonder had been possible it would have fallen still further.) Thus the people of Meqele were forced to pay 60 Birr per quintal, or an additional 50 per cent, as a premium on account of this disruption.⁴⁰ During 1982, when restrictions were introduced on the trade between Wollo, Raya and Meqele, the price in Meqele rose by 67 per cent.⁴¹

As a substantial proportion of the adult male population of Tigray was formerly involved in petty trade, including grain, the near-destruction of the grain trade caused much rural unemployment.

Restrictions on Migration

Increasingly tight restrictions on movement were imposed from 1980 onwards. Restrictions started with controlling access to towns. They were

³⁷ de Waal, 1990, pp. 56–7.

³⁸ James Firebrace and Gayle Smith, "The Hidden Revolution: An Analysis of Social Change in Tigray (Northern Ethiopia) Based on Eyewitness Accounts," London, War on Want, 1982, p. 37, footnote.

³⁹ In the 1970s, 70% of the grain supply to Meqele originated from Raya and Kobo, and 10% from Gonder. The Shire grain was exported to Eritrea.

⁴⁰ Calculated from: de Waal, 1990, pp. 44–9.

⁴¹ de Waal, 1990, p. 44; RRC, "Food Supply Status and Forecast No. 1," December 1982.

tightened in southern Tigray in 1982 and Wollo and Gonder during 1983-4. While migration was never expressly forbidden, the welter of petty legislation that existed acted as a license to pillage and harass by any local official or soldier.

The most direct manner in which these were implemented was through a pass system -- any individual needed a pass from the chairman of his or her Peasant Association (PA) chairman in order to leave the vicinity of the village. An individual caught without a pass was liable to arbitrary detention or worse. People from TPLF-held areas could not obtain passes. Where they existed, PAs were reluctant to issue passes. If someone was caught in suspicious circumstances with a pass, the PA officials who authorized the pass would be liable to punishment. Given the unpredictability of local officialdom, especially its propensity to refuse to recognize the legitimacy of a document issued elsewhere, this acted as powerful disincentive to issuing passes.

In addition, PA officials would generally refuse to issue a travel pass until the individual had paid past taxes and "voluntary contributions." Similarly, a person entering a town without evidence of being a dutiful citizen in respect of tax payments was liable to be detained or harassed.

A number of government policies acted as powerful deterrents to rural people visiting towns in Tigray. During 1980-3, rural visitors to towns were subjected to routine harassment and robbery, on minor pretexts such as coming from an area near where the TPLF was reported to be active, failure to have a PA membership card, or lack of proof of tax payments. In January 1984, many routine checks were relaxed -- just as the conscription campaign for the first round of national military service was getting under way. Some visitors to towns were conscripted against their will.

Also starting in January 1984, there was a widespread campaign against suspected TPLF supporters. Army checkpoints were mandated to detain any would-be migrants who were suspected of TPLF sympathies. Several thousand people were detained, and more than 600 were kept in prison or killed. Among those killed were 20 senior administrators in Tigray.⁴² Waves of arrests later in the year swelled the number of detainees.

While most of the peasants detained in 1984 were later either forcibly resettled, conscripted to the army, or released, some remained in prison for more than 18 months. Together with many political detainees from urban backgrounds, they were released on February 8, 1986, when the TPLF stormed the central prison in Meqele and freed no fewer than 1,800 political

⁴² *Africa Contemporary Record*, 1983-4, pp. B125-6.

detainees. An international team of human rights workers later interviewed some of them.⁴³ One 17 year old farmer was detained while visiting the market in Axum; the security officials who were carrying out a check on all marketgoers' identity cards said he "looked the physical type to be a spy." Another case was a child farmer aged 14, who was arrested in August 1984 on the accusation of carrying paraffin to the TPLF -- which the boy denied even having had in his possession.

In mid-1984 there was a similar though smaller crackdown in Gonder. In September 1984, some of the Tigrayan delegates to the Tenth Anniversary celebrations in Addis Ababa were arrested.

Sexual harassment was a strong deterrent to women migrants throughout the period. When questioned by aid workers after the capture of most of the Tigrayan towns by the TPLF in 1988, a number of women mentioned sexual harassment as their greatest worry.

From November 1984 onwards, fear of resettlement added yet another disincentive for visiting towns.

A final deterrent on movement was the dissemination of land mines. Though planting land mines became most common only after 1986, from 1980 onwards anti-personnel land mines were planted on paths, and around army garrisons.

The result of these restrictions and deterrents was that normal patterns of movement, trade, migration and exchange were stifled.

The Consequences for the TPLF

The famine profoundly influenced the fortunes of the TPLF. In the short term the famine was a disaster for the front. Between 1980 and 1984, it was unable to tighten its military grip on Tigray. In 1982-3, it expanded into Wollo, but was gradually forced to restrict its operations. 1985 was to be a year in which the army was able to make significant territorial gains. In late 1984, in response to the increasingly desperate situation, the TPLF decided on the mass evacuation of people to refugee camps in Sudan (see chapter 11). The loss of people from central Tigray and the diversion of resources to controlling the mass exodus left the TPLF militarily vulnerable.

In the long term the TPLF was able to turn the Tigray people's experience of famine into an asset -- perhaps its greatest asset. A TPLF leader, referring to the bombing campaign launched in September 1980, said: "This is a new tactic to demoralize the people, but it will only make

⁴³ Alex Lyon, Michael McColgan, Christian Rostoker and Didier Malapel, "Torture and the Violation of Human Rights in Tigray, Ethiopia," London, 1986.

them hate the government more."⁴⁴ By 1985 rural people in Tigray knew that they would never be free from famine while the army remained in the province. The experience of war-induced famine was to be the greatest source of volunteers for the TPLF.

The early 1980s also forced the TPLF to be intensely pragmatic. Initially, it attempted socialist measures such as price control and the creation of cooperatives in the areas of western Tigray which it controlled. These were not a success. In particular, when the price controls were introduced in mid 1983, traders simply boycotted the markets, and after a few weeks the TPLF backed down. A policy of encouraging free enterprise prevailed thereafter. Virtually no new cooperatives were created. No attempts to control credit, or restrain moneylenders from charging extortionate rates of interest, were made. The rationale was that the TPLF had nothing better with which to replace the existing system. Above all, migration and petty trade were encouraged. Migrants to western Tigray were assisted by a network of checkpoints where relief was given, and were helped in the reception areas on the system of "a family for a family."

The Consequences for Government Military Strategy

Did the government know what it was doing between 1980 and 1984? The answer is: to a limited extent only. The government was determined to restrict the food supply to the TPLF and to attack the economic base of the population that supported it, but did not seem to realize the extreme but inevitable consequences of these actions. This is consistent with the over-rigid thinking that informed many of the government's social and agricultural policies, that wholly overlooked the importance of mobility, trade and local knowledge in rural people's subsistence. In the minds of the members of the Dergue, famine was associated with drought, and counter-insurgency with killing rebels.

The lack of realization is illustrated by the government's response to the famine. In the early days, this was a straightforward portrayal of the problem as one of drought, and appeal for international assistance. As late as 1983, Mengistu felt able to draw attention to the famine. In his May Day speech, Mengistu said:

Compatriots, there is a drought in some regions of our country. This has brought famine among some of our people in the villages. This situation tests our goal. We started off saying that we will at least satisfy

⁴⁴ Dan Connell in *The Guardian*, London, October 17, 1980.

our food needs ... it is unacceptable that we cannot at least satisfy our food needs. It is a mystery that we are starving when we have enough land that can even produce surplus for other countries, and sufficient manpower. We need to get out of this shameful situation.

It seems likely that having created one of the most severe and widespread famines in modern times, the Ethiopian government did not fully grasp what it had done.

That state of ignorance was never total, and did not last. By the end of 1984, there can be no doubt that the government was aware that it had been instrumental in creating the famine. It may not have realized the complexities or the depth of its culpability, but senior members of the government knew that the war and the famine were inextricably intertwined. In December 1984, Acting Foreign Minister Tibebe Bekele said to the US Charge d'Affaires, "probably with more candor than he intended," that "food is a major element in our strategy against the secessionists."⁴⁵

A belated government awareness of its role in the famine can also be seen in the military strategy adopted from the beginning of 1985 onwards, which aimed at utilizing food supplies as a counter-insurgency tool. This issue will be taken up in chapters 10 and 11.

⁴⁵ David A. Kom, *Ethiopia, the United States and the Soviet Union*, London, 1986, p. 137.

9. "ECONOMIC WAR" ON THE PEASANTS AND FAMINE

It is widely recognized that the agricultural and economic policies of the Ethiopian government contributed to the creation of the famine. An assessment of the merits and demerits of such policies mostly lies outside the mandate of a human rights organization, with a few significant exceptions such as the brutal manner in which many of the policies were implemented, and the lack of any channel for debating issues of national importance and thereby changing policy.

This chapter will cover some of these areas of human rights abuse, and also the broader issues of agricultural and economic policy. The latter is important for two reasons. One is that it is necessary to assess the entire range of the man-made factors that created famine, so that the role of human rights abuse can be placed properly in context. The second is that the demonstration of the disastrous consequences of these policies should mean that on any future occasions when they are knowingly followed, and duly create famine, it will not be possible for their proponents to defend themselves with the claim that they acted in good faith, but in ignorance of the consequences of their actions.

The Logic of Food Supplies

The Dergue seized power in 1974 during a wave of popular revulsion at the corruption of the rule of Haile Selassie. Some aspects of the revolutionary government were radically new, but in certain respects it faced similar problems to its predecessor and responded in similar ways.

One important stimulus to the revulsion against the *ancien regime* was the discovery of the famine in Wollo by the British television journalist Jonathan Dimbleby, whose film "The Unknown Famine" shocked the western world into acting, and the Ethiopian government into admitting the problem for the first time. Dimbleby's pictures of destitution and extreme hunger are difficult to watch even today, for those who have become accustomed to pictures of the 1980s famines. On September 11, 1974, the day before the Emperor was deposed, excerpts from the film were shown interspersed with footage from the wedding of the daughter of a prominent government minister, for which the cake had been specially flown from Italy. The following day, as the Emperor was driven from his palace in the back seat of a Volkswagen beetle, the crowds shouted *lieba!* -- "thief!"

Haile Selassie's symbols of Imperial authority were shattered for ever. The Dergue at first tried to claim legitimacy through slogans referring to "Ethiopia first" and "Ethiopian socialism." If these were not to be wholly empty, radical measures were needed. One such measure that was adopted was the creation of the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC), a well-funded government department, assisted by expatriate advisors as well as Ethiopian experts, to prevent future famines, distribute relief to the victims of natural adversity, and rehabilitate those left destitute by the famines of 1972-4.¹ Another slogan was "Land to the tiller," which led to the land reform proclamation of March 1975, in which private ownership of land was abolished, and with it all the feudal exactions that had so oppressed the peasantry. It was optimistically hoped that the creation of the RRC, together with other radical measures, would banish famine from Ethiopia altogether.

While the ideology of the new government was radically different from its predecessor, and some of its actions were truly revolutionary, the economic constraints it faced were similar. It needed to feed the cities, especially Addis Ababa, and the army.

Before the land reform of 1975, most farmers in the south paid a large proportion of their crop to landlords in the form of rent. This payment then constituted the bulk of the food that was marketed in the main towns. After the land reform act was promulgated, this was no longer the case — much of the food was kept by the farmers for their own consumption. Meanwhile, in the urban areas, wages stagnated and the price of food rose fast. Standards of living for industrial workers dropped by between one third and one half between 1974 and 1979. Economists argued that this warranted drastic interventions by the government to purchase staple grains. Placating the urban population was also an important political priority for the government.

After 1977, the rapidly-growing army also needed to be supplied with food. An army of 300,000 people consumes a minimum of 60,000 tons of grain per year.

The government adopted an array of strategies to deal with its food problem. Its ultimate aim was the complete transformation of the Ethiopian peasant farmers into workers on state-run cooperatives. This was never achieved, though two ambitious attempts were made in the later 1980s to move rapidly in that direction — resettlement and villagization — which are the subject of later chapters.

¹ The RRC was in fact created by Haile Selassie, already bowing to the revolutionary tide, as almost his last act as emperor.

During the period 1978–84, the main government strategies included:

- * The Agricultural Marketing Corporation (AMC), which was set up in 1976, had its powers dramatically expanded.
- * Heavy and even punitive taxes were levied.
- * Strict controls on the private grain trade were enforced.
- * Restrictions on peasants' movement and laboring were enforced.
- * State farms were developed, using forced labor.
- * The RRC was mandated to transform destitute populations into a potential collectivized workforce, and to obtain food from the international community.

These policies, which amounted to an economic war on the independent peasantry waged by the state, were instrumental in creating vulnerability to famine well beyond the area of counter-insurgency operations.

The Agricultural Marketing Corporation

The activities of the AMC were described by a peasant in Wollo as "robbing the poor to feed the rich."²

The government set up the AMC in 1976 and gave it increasing powers over the following years. AMC operations were gradually extended to all the major crop-producing regions. By 1980, it was purchasing over 400,000 metric tonnes (MT) of food per annum, two thirds of it from Peasant Associations (PAs). In 1982/3, 573,000 MT was procured. Each PA was given a quota of grain which it had to supply -- but was not informed how large its quota would be until after the planting season.³ From the 1980/1 season onwards, the price for each type of grain was fixed centrally and was the same in all parts of the country. In 1980, the prices decided upon by the government were about 20–25% lower than those

² Dessalegn Rahmato, "Famine and Survival Strategies: A Case Study from Northeast Ethiopia," Addis Ababa, Institute of Development Research (IDR), 1987, p. 109.

³ S. Franzel, Legesse Dachi, F. Colburn and Getahun Degu, "Grain Marketing and Peasant Production in Ethiopia," Addis Ababa, IDR, 1989, pp. 2–3.

advised by economists,⁴ and stayed at the same level for eight years, despite fast inflation in the prices on the open market. In 1984, the fixed price was only about 20% of the free market price in Addis Ababa. The quotas were also centrally determined, and often bore little relation to the size of the harvest. In Wollo, the quota remained unchanged at 23,000 MT in 1982 and 1983. Local officials in the Ministry of Agriculture objected to the quota and the AMC's inflexible demands for prompt delivery to collection points, but the AMC was unmoved, arguing that there had been an adequate harvest. (The harvest was of course adequate, but the AMC quota was set at a level above the disposable surplus, and other government policies were endangering the survival of the people.) In the drought year of 1984 the quota fell to 6,000 MT (the government was still taking food out of famine-stricken Wollo) but was reinstated at a high level in 1985/6.

In theory, market mechanisms could have provided the food that the government needed. In practice, the government was not prepared to wait for the time such measures would have needed to work, and its Marxist ideology was also hostile to the free market.

Delivery quotas to the AMC were set for each PA. All farmers, regardless of the size of their harvest, had to meet their quota. "Even the poorest of the poor had to sell" complained one Wollo farmer bitterly.⁵ If they failed, the punishment could be confiscation of assets or imprisonment. One study estimated that as a result, half of the grain taken by the AMC was not "surplus," but was taken from basic household reserves.⁶ The same study found that as many as a quarter of the peasants were forced to *buy* grain in order to meet their quotas. They had to buy on the open market, often selling essential assets in order to raise the money, and then sell at a considerable loss to the AMC -- which often only made its payments many months later. Many other peasants had to buy grain later in order to have grain to eat later in the season. Some young farmers even abandoned their land and went to look for work on state farms, because the burden of delivering their quotas was so heavy that they could not afford to save to set themselves up with an ox and a plow.

⁴ Alemayehu Lirensu, "Grain Marketing and Pricing in Ethiopia: A Study of the Impact of Grain Quota and Fixed Grain Prices on Grain Producers," Addis Ababa, IDR, 1987, p. 38.

⁵ Peter Cutler and John Mitchell, "An Evaluation of BandAid Funded Agricultural Inputs Distribution Programmes in Wollo Administrative Region, Ethiopia," London, 1987, pp. 43-4.

⁶ Alemayehu Lirensu, 1987, p. 106.

Dr Dessalegn Rahmato calculated that a typical peasant in Ambassel, Wollo, harvested 14.7 quintals⁷ of grain per year, of which 5.8 quintals were paid to the AMC, leaving 8.9 quintals — about the bare minimum for a family of five to survive on. Of the harvest of 6 quintals of pulses, 2.15 were taken by the AMC.⁸ If the harvest were below average, the family would suffer a shortfall — on the basis of this exaction alone.

The grain procured by the AMC was supposed to be resold throughout the country. In Harerghe, the distribution quotas were 30% to the towns, 30% to PAs, 29% to pastoralists, 10% to government institutions, and one per cent to private agencies.⁹ In fact, it was destined solely for the larger towns — in Harerghe, 100 per cent went to Dire Dawa and Harer towns — and the army. In 1984, the AMC's only and belated response to the food shortage in Wollo was to allocate 6,000 MT for distribution in the towns.¹⁰ In the later 1980s, the army took an ever larger share and by 1989, even Addis Ababa was not receiving its AMC quota, which was entirely destined for the military.

A coercive government policy, implemented systematically and often brutally, had the effect of impoverishing many thousands of peasant farmers. Some were reduced to famine conditions, and others to a state in which they could no longer sell food to poorer neighbors or migrants, or offer them employment or other forms of assistance.

Taxes and Levies

The peasants of Ethiopia were subjected to a wide range of taxes and levies. These steadily increased during the late 1970s and 1980s. All farmers were required to pay agricultural income tax (20 Birr), a PA membership fee (minimum 5 Birr), surtax (usually 25 Birr), plus levies for road-building, school-building, literacy and other campaigns. Members of the Women's Association paid a 3 Birr annual membership fee, and all households contributed at least 3 Birr to the Youth Association. School fees ranged from 2 Birr to 15 Birr. Starting in 1984, all were required

⁷ One quintal is 100 kilograms.

⁸ Dessalegn Rahmato, 1987, p. 101.

⁹ Ashenafi Moges, "Food Shortages in Harerghe Region of Ethiopia," DPhil Thesis, Oxford, 1988, p. 276.

¹⁰ Peter Cutler, "The Development of the 1983-85 Famine in Northern Ethiopia," PhD thesis, London, 1988, p. 109.

to pay a levy for the work of the RRC, usually 20–25 Birr. Famine-stricken peasants in Wollo could not fail to see the irony of the enforced payment of this "famine tax" to the government.¹¹ From 1988 a contribution "for the territorial integrity of the Motherland" was also levied. In addition there were frequent demands for corvée labor (for instance for state farms) and campaign labor (for road-building, reforestation, etc), always levied without regard to the agricultural cycle. These labor demands often averaged one day per week, with fines for non-attendance or ill-discipline. Some taxes were levied by allocating quotas to districts, which decided on the level of individual payments.

Jason Clay of Cultural Survival made an estimate of the total tax burden on farmers in Harerghe, based on interviews with refugees, and produced the extraordinarily high figure of 546.92 Birr per annum -- more than twice the per capita gross national product of Ethiopia.¹² This figure is so high that it needs to be treated with caution, but it is worth noting that about 40 per cent of the total consisted of irregular payments to the PA chairman, cadres and local militia.

In areas of western Wollega recently occupied by the OLF, Dr Trevor Trueman estimated that the tax burden had ranged from 70 Birr to 150 Birr yearly, plus charges for schooling and unofficial payments of health services and other necessities.

Taxation was certainly punitive. Many investigators in rural Ethiopia report peasants being forced to sell crops or animals or go into debt to meet tax payments. In Wollo, after a small remission of taxes in 1984/5 due to the famine, tax payments increased in 1986. Agricultural income tax was levied at a rate of 45 Birr, leading to suspicions that "arrears" were being collected. "Arrears" of taxes were also collected by army patrols in Tigray and north Wollo.

Impact of the Policies: Grain Storage

Traditionally, Ethiopian farmers try to keep a large amount of grain in storage, and will only empty their stores when they are certain of the next harvest. This meant that the complete failure of one year's harvest would not lead to famine. The government policies described above made this impossible by the 1980s. As a result, the harvest failure of 1984 led

¹¹ Dessalegn Rahmato, 1987, p. 101.

¹² Jason Clay, "The Case of Harerghe: The Testimony of Refugees in Somalia," in J. Clay, S. Steingrabber and P. Niggli, *The Spoils of Famine: Ethiopian Famine Policy Peasant Agriculture*, Cambridge, Mass., 1988, p. 188.

directly to famine in many parts of the country which were unaffected by war.

Restrictions on Trade

A number of the policies adopted in Tigray and its borderlands for counter-insurgency were later expanded to areas under government control, for reasons of social control and socio-economic transformation. One of these was restrictions on petty trade, especially in grain. Outside insurgent areas, the intention of the policy was to direct as much as possible of the marketed grain to the AMC.

The chapter on the Red Terror has documented the attack on large merchants in the years 1975-8, and the accompanying legislation in the Special Penal Code which acted as a deterrent to legitimate commerce. A welter of petty legislation further restricting the grain trade, much of it at the provincial level, followed after 1978. All trading licenses were issued by the Grain Purchasing Task Force (an affiliate of the AMC). Grain wholesaling became illegal in much of the country, for instance Gojjam after 1982. The number of grain traders declined each year after 1980 -- 1,100 had their licenses revoked in Gojjam in 1982/3,¹³ and 342 in Arsi in 1986.¹⁴ Only in 1988 was the trade re-legalized; it was deregulated in March 1990, although transport remained strictly regulated until the fall of the government.

No specific directives were issued relating to traders using pack animals, but the complexities of licensing and the vague definitions of "hoarding" and "profiteering" were sufficient to endorse any local official's attempt to confiscate the goods of a petty trader. One Ethiopian economist noted "it is unclear whether small scale grain trade is illegal or not".¹⁵

Road blocks were set up on all major and minor routes, in order to check that no unauthorized trade was occurring. In some instances, the "concession" was sold or granted to favored individuals within the local PA, who would use the income from bribes, fines, confiscations and levies for himself -- providing a clear incentive to obstruct the trade as much as possible. The tariff for a ten-ton truck at a single road block could be as high as 5,000 Birr. Commonly, an individual was restricted to a limited

¹³ Alemayehu Lirensso, 1987, p. 73.

¹⁴ Franzel *et al*, 1989, p. 12.

¹⁵ Alemayehu Lirensso, 1987, p. 52.

quantity of grain, such as one quintal. The restrictions were also extended to people bearing gifts of grain. In 1984, some residents of Addis Ababa tried to send food to their relatives in the famine zone, only to have the food confiscated at checkpoints.

Starting with the land reform proclamation of 1975, government regulations required "specialization." Each petty-trader was required to make a choice between being a full-time farmer and a full-time trader, and in the event of choosing the latter, to live in a town. As most petty-traders engaged in trade during the dry season when they could not work on their farms, this was a direct attack on their means of survival. This restriction was never fully enforced, but provided another excuse for local officials to exact bribes from traders, or to confiscate mules and grain at will. On the occasions when it was enforced (such as Wollo, starting in 1984) the consequences were even worse.

The government regarded time spent at market as "wasted" or "unproductive," and measures to restrict markets were introduced depending on the zeal and ideological correctness of local administrators and cadres. Some of the cadre's attempts to control trade and marketing in a resettlement site in Wollega included:¹⁶

- * Restricting the time people were allowed to spend at a market.
- * Imposing a synchronization of markets.
- * Closing small roadside markets.
- * Defining market days as "work days," so that those who attended markets lost work points in the collective work system of the settlement.
- * Banning men from attending markets at certain times of year, so that only women could attend.
- * Banning all attendance at markets during the harvest season, for 2-3 weeks.

Such stringent measures were rare. More commonly, small markets were closed, as being "unnecessary," or changed from twice weekly to weekly. Most markets were synchronized, being held on Saturdays, which

¹⁶ Alula Pankhurst, "Settling for a New World: People and the State in an Ethiopian Resettlement Village," PhD Thesis, Manchester, 1990, p. 332.

prevented traders and peasants attending more than one each week. In some areas, a ban was introduced on peasants attending more than one market in their locality.

Restrictions were particularly tight in Gonder during 1984. This was related to factors including counter-insurgency operations against TPLF-EPDM, the hard-line administrators in the province and their hostility to private trade, and several scandals involving local officials profiteering in the grain trade. These restrictions were particularly damaging because the 1983 harvest in Gonder was good, and unrestricted trade would have allowed much of the surplus to be redistributed commercially to the famine areas of Tigray and north Wollo.

Before the revolution, there were an estimated 20,000-30,000 grain dealers in the country. In 1984, the Ministry of Domestic Trade had issued licenses to just 4,942, and by law they were required to sell a minimum of half of their purchases to the AMC. Whereas over half the farmers in the TPLF-controlled village of Adiet engaged in trade,¹⁷ only two out of 150 in one study in Harerghe did so,¹⁸ and a similarly small number did so in Wollo.¹⁹

Markets are critical to peasants' economic activity in normal times, and are absolutely essential to "survival strategies" during famine. By these measures, the rural marketing system was seriously crippled, and the flow of grain from surplus to deficit areas was effectively stemmed. The consequences of this for Tigray (where the restrictions were combined with the bombing of marketplaces) have been mentioned --- comparable, though less severe, damage was done to rural people's survival chances throughout the country.

Restrictions on Moneylending

A consequence of the restriction on trade was a sharp decline in moneylending in many parts of the country. There was also a deliberate assault on the practices of rural credit.

Debt is an essential part of rural life --- farmers rely on taking out debts in order to obtain seed, food or money to hire a plough team. Before the revolution, rural moneylending had been common throughout the country.

¹⁷ Richard Baker, interviewed by Alex de Waal, November 1990.

¹⁸ Ashenafi Moges, 1988, p. 244.

¹⁹ Dessalegn Rahmato, 1987, p. 98.

In TPLF-held areas of Tigray, the majority of farmers took out loans from traders during the famine.²⁰ While high rates of interest were charged, these loans were important in enabling them to survive.

However, in government-held areas, established sources of loans dried up. Traders were driven from the market, either killed or driven abroad in the early days of the revolution, or later forced out of business. Local courts and administrators refused to recognize the validity of credit agreements. The most important study of the famine in rural Wollo noted "Far more peasants would have taken out loans than actually had ... if they had more and better access to credit services."²¹ A similar huge post-revolutionary contraction in credit was noted in Harerghe,²² though in some other (non-famine stricken) parts of the country, the supply of credit was partly made up by other peasants.²³

State Farms

After the revolution, the government nationalized all the commercial farms in the country, and ran them as state farms. A fixed wage rate of 93 cents per day (equivalent to US\$0.44 or less) was paid -- well below the market rate. Unable to recruit sufficient labor at this rate, the government took to conscripting laborers either by force or with empty promises. The results were not only abuses against the human rights of the workers, but a dramatic drop in the availability of work.

The Setit-Humera mechanized farms close to the Sudan border employed between 100,000 and 300,000 seasonal laborers annually in the early 1970s, providing an essential source of income for those whose crops had failed. 16,000 laborers on the schemes fled to Sudan when the government began forcible conscription into the army from among them. Rather than hiring

²⁰ 62 per cent of the sample interviewed by Gerezgerhe Bezabeh and Alex de Waal, "Evaluation of the Impact of the Agricultural Rehabilitation Programme, Tigray," London, ACORD, 1988, p. 19.

²¹ Dessalegn Rahmato, 1987, p. 251.

²² Ashenafi Moges, 1988, p. 322.

²³ Dessalegn Rahmato, *Agrarian Reform in Ethiopia*, Trenton, NJ, 1985, p. 65.

laborers, the government then began a program of forced labor, which was documented by the Anti-Slavery Society.²⁴

In July 1980, the government began to recruit laborers in the towns with promises of payment of 49.50 Birr per month, plus food, medical services and accommodation. When insufficient volunteers were found, soldiers and *kebele* guards simply rounded up people from the street. 14,140 "volunteers" were taken in Addis Ababa and about 30,000 in other towns. Their belongings (even their shoes) were confiscated and they were crammed into trucks, without even the most basic facilities or stops for rest or sleeping; the trucks were so overcrowded that they had to squat for the journey of over three days. On arrival at the army camp close to Humera, the soldiers rushed onto the trucks and dragged away many women, who were raped that night, and many of whom were never seen again by their relatives or friends.

At the Humera state farm itself, no facilities or accommodation were available. Food for the workers was inadequate, and twelve hours of work was enforced each day. No wages were paid. Minor disciplinary offenses were dealt with by detention or beating; offenders were called "counter-revolutionaries." The whole camp was guarded by armed members of the "Production Task Force" who detained or shot dead those trying to escape. In prison, the cells were grossly overcrowded and torture was routine. According to the farm supervisors, 1,626 people died from starvation, disease, beatings and torture, or were shot trying to escape. Several hundred disappeared, including women abducted for sexual abuse by soldiers and officials. Many others fled to Sudan.

This program not only involved gross abuses of the rights of the forcibly recruited laborers, but removed an important source of income from poor people in Tigray, rendering them more vulnerable to famine.

Similar practices, albeit on a smaller scale, were employed to raise labor for the farms in the Awash valley. These farms had employed over 30,000 laborers, mostly from Wollo and Tigray, in the early 1970s. By the 1980s, laborers were recruited for two to three weeks unpaid labor from central Wollo, and hence no paid employment was available. Other state farms recruited labor in similar ways, with similar results.

²⁴ Anti-Slavery Society, "Forced Labour in Humera: Intervention on Behalf of the Anti-Slavery Society," presented to the UN Economic and Social Council, Commission on Human Rights, Working Group on Slavery, Geneva, August 1981.

Other Restrictions on Wage Labor

Closely related to the restriction of movement and the recruitment of labor for state farms was the restriction of wage labor on smallholdings.

Since the land reform of 1975, wage labor was technically illegal. While rarely implemented in the north, this ban provided yet another reason for officials to harass and punish individuals. In southern Ethiopia, the ban was enforced more consistently, particularly in the case of migrant labourers. In the early 1970s, more than 50,000 migrants came to Keffa every year to pick coffee. Many came from eastern Gonder (an area which suffered famine in 1984/5); some came from Wollo and Tigray. By the early 1980s, the migration had come to a complete halt.²⁵ A similar seasonal migration of laborers from Tigray to Illubabor also ceased.

Peasants were also required to do unpaid labor on the fields of PA officials and militiamen.

Impact of the Policies: Employment

It can safely be assumed that in a normal year, at least one million people in Tigray and north Wollo are reliant on off-farm sources of income, primarily wage labor and petty trade. A conservative estimate of the impact of the government restrictions is that the available employment was gradually cut by half between 1980 and late 1983. The result of 500,000 people -- perhaps one in twelve of the population -- being rendered unemployed in a time of poor food availability was disastrous. These people formed a large proportion of the total number of destitute migrants seeking help from REST, the RRC or voluntary agencies.

Impact of the Policies: The Livestock Economy

The restrictions on trade and migration, together with the contraction of credit, meant that most rural people had essentially only one option left to obtain money for food: selling animals.

The famine of 1983-5 is remarkable in that it is the only recorded famine in north-east Africa in which animal sales outnumbered animal deaths. In all other famines, most animal owners have preferred to keep most animals in the anticipation of future recovery, obtaining their food through means other than selling them. Some animals die on account of

²⁵ Adrian P. Wood, "The Decline of Seasonal Labour Migration to the Coffee Forests of South-West Ethiopia," *Geography*, 68, 1983, pp. 53-6.

hunger, thirst or disease, but that is a risk the owners are prepared to take -- they only sell when they are truly desperate. In 1983-5 in Tigray and Wollo the reverse was true. Almost all the animals lost were sold in order to buy food -- 79% of oxen according to one survey.²⁶ Losses due to drought alone might have amounted to 50% at most -- the much larger number sold out of desperation represents another premium paid by the poor for the military strategy of the government.

An important consequence is the enduring impoverishment of northern Ethiopia as a result of the famine.

Animals -- particularly plow oxen -- are essential to economic survival in the Ethiopian highlands. The extraordinarily high levels of animal loss in the famine -- far in excess of the losses that would have been caused by drought alone -- represent a hard blow at the very basis of the peasant economy. Six years later, animal numbers are still well below what they were before the famine, and the lack of plow oxen represents the single most severe constraint on rural production. The effects of the famine persist in increased vulnerability to famine up to today.

The Relief and Rehabilitation Commission

The RRC was a paradoxical institution. On the one hand, for the decade after its creation in 1974 it enjoyed considerable institutional strength and legitimacy, and a high degree of autonomy from other government departments. The RRC was relatively efficient at collecting, analyzing and disseminating information, and in coordinating relief programs. It compared well to similar institutions in neighboring countries. The Commissioner was able to travel abroad and meet senior diplomats and politicians from foreign countries and the UN and appeal for aid on his own behalf. At a time when all news of the famine was suppressed in the domestic Ethiopian media (June-September 1984) the RRC was still able to publish its bulletins on the developing famine.

The behavior of the RRC is a warning to those who would wish to see the Ethiopian government as wholly monolithic and dedicated solely to the single-minded destruction of internal opposition. During the years 1980-4 there was a real paradox that while several arms of the Ethiopian government were doing a great deal to create and perpetuate famine, one arm was busy trying to relieve it -- with a certain degree of success.

However, the RRC fulfilled three vital functions which fitted in extremely well with the twin government aims of suppressing insurgencies

²⁶ Cutler, 1988, p. 313.

and maintaining a food supply sufficient to ensure its independence from the demands of the ordinary rural people.

One of these roles was using the destitute population of Ethiopia as the raw material for the creation of new villages, settlement schemes, state farms and collectives. The villagization carried out in Bale and Sidamo from 1979–84 is a case in point; resettlement will be considered later.

The RRC's second role was propaganda. The RRC portrayed the famine as a problem of drought and over-population, played down the existence of the war, and consistently claimed that all famine victims were being reached by it and the voluntary agencies working alongside it. This meant that the question of access to the millions of people in EPLF- and TPLF-controlled areas was never given the publicity that it warranted. The extremely needy populations in the war zones thus received far less than they required, while generous relief could be distributed in less needy government controlled areas in the center and south.

The third role played by the RRC was as a procurement agent for foreign assistance. It had only limited success up to 1984, but after 1985 it was exceptionally successful, and was repeatedly accused of underestimating needs by the donors. While much of the aid given to the RRC undoubtedly went to genuine victims of famine, much went to less worthy recipients. The militias in Eritrea and Tigray are one example (see next chapter). Another example is the manner in which relief agencies were directed to set up distribution programs in areas of the country which were poor but by no means suffering from famine -- in some instances these were areas in which large-scale procurement by the AMC was occurring. Finally, diversion of food aid to the military and the marketplace certainly took place (see chapter 10).

TPLF and EPLF Social and Economic Policies

The TPLF and EPLF both avowed radical socialist economic doctrines, but in fact followed far more pragmatic policies.

Both fronts bought grain on the open market. An attempt by the TPLF in mid 1983 to enforce controlled grain prices in Sheraro market failed when the local traders boycotted the market, and the policy was abandoned. Ironically, the TPLF came under criticism from conservative governments

in Britain and the US for paying high prices for grain for relief distributions.²⁷

TPLF taxation policy consisted of levying a "voluntary contribution" of 5 Birr.²⁸ While there are no reports of coercion, a strong element of social pressure was certainly present. Other taxes were levied on the export of grain and animals, and the import of luxury goods. The EPLF had similar policies, in addition to its more significant funds from expatriate Eritreans' donations and fundraising, and a charge on their remittances to relatives living in EPLF-controlled areas.

Both fronts moved from opposing private enterprise to promoting it. In the late 1970s, the TPLF fought against conservative political forces, including the EDU, and thus contributed to the exodus of traders from Tigray. It also set up cooperatives to compete with traders, and attempted to restrict traders' activities. These measures failed. From 1983-4 onwards, despite its increasingly hard-line Marxist ideology, the TPLF imposed no hindrances on trade and regarded merchants as "strategic allies" in the struggle. Petty trade was recognized as essential to peasant survival, and encouraged, especially after 1987. There was, however, an assumption that economic development would mean that it would ultimately cease to be profitable, so that peasants would abandon it.²⁹ In the late 1980s the EPLF revoked its earlier intentions to nationalize most of the Eritrean economy, which had the immediate impact of leading to measures facilitating private trade and enterprise.

Early TPLF measures also served to restrict migrant labor. Though the front never imposed any formal ban on wage labor, a number of policies discouraged it. These included the attacks on the merchant-landowner class of western Tigray, whose farms were a major source of employment, surveillance of the population to prevent infiltration of government agents and saboteurs (particularly in 1980), and the TPLF's own land reform program, which made membership in a *baito* (equivalent to a PA) a precondition for having land rights. The first two of these policies changed from 1983 onwards, so that between 1983 and 1985 the TPLF was actually

²⁷ In a letter to the head of an aid agency, dated July 11, 1989, the British Minister for Overseas Development, Chris Patten, stated his opposition to "a system which we believe is at the least giving merchants excessive profits and may well be helping to finance the TPLF."

²⁸ Gebru Tareke, "Preliminary History of Peasant Resistance in Tigray (Ethiopia)," *Africa* (Roma), 39, (1984) pp. 213-14.

²⁹ Meles Zenawi, interviewed by Alex de Waal, November 1988.

assisting migration, and itself providing wage laboring opportunities in western Tigray, for example weaving baskets and tapping gum trees. Large landholdings in thinly-populated areas were also permitted.

The Consequences for the People

The ultimate human cost of the famine is the number of people who suffered a premature death. Most of those who died were children under the age of five.

Those with animals had to sell; those without had two options -- to stay and starve, or move to relief shelters. The phenomenally large population living in the relief shelters in 1984/5 -- over 500,000 -- was the result of this.

Relief shelters and refugee camps are notoriously unhealthy places -- one epidemiologist has written that they "constitute one of the most pathogenic environments imaginable."³⁰ Epidemics of measles, typhus, relapsing fever, dysentery and cholera swept through and decimated the camp populations. Though debilitation due to undernourishment undoubtedly played a part in the high levels of mortality that resulted, overcrowding and unsanitary conditions were at least as important. It is a rule of thumb that the death rates in a camp or shelter are about five times those prevailing in the community at large.³¹ Some of this is due to the fact that the camp inmates are already weaker than those who remain behind in the villages, but much of it is caused directly by the degraded public health environment. There were estimated to be up to 150,000 deaths in camps during the famine³² -- half or more of these deaths could have been averted had there been no need for relief camps.

The pictures of Korem and Meqele filmed by Mohamed Amin of Visnews in October 1984 were thus the direct result of the counter-insurgency strategy of the government.

³⁰ Bruce Dick, "Diseases of Refugees -- Causes, Effects and Control," *Transactions of the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene*, 78, (1984) p. 736.

³¹ Journalists commonly speak of the inhabitants of relief camps as "the lucky ones" on account of the small amounts of relief they receive. This is of course not so.

³² John Seaman, "Famine Mortality in Ethiopia and Sudan," Liege, International Union for the Scientific Study of Population, 1987.

In the years 1980-3, restricted access to the Tigrayan towns meant that rural people had restricted access to health services. In 1981 there was an epidemic of malaria, in 1982 there was an outbreak of meningitis, and in 1984 there were serious epidemics of measles and other diseases. These undoubtedly caused more deaths than they would have done had free access to health facilities been available. In response to this problem, REST began setting up health clinics, especially in 1981/2, but it was unable to cope with the magnitude of the health problems.

How Many Died?

The total number of people killed by the famine is not known. The UN has gone on record saying that one million died, but this is no more than a guess. No systematic studies of mortality among the population in general were conducted, and the government discouraged any attempts to carry them out.³³ The mortality data for the 1970s famines are better than those for the 1980s. The RRC never published its own figures for deaths.

The death totals in camps can be estimated with some accuracy. 40,000 died in camps in Wollo between August 1984 and August 1985,³⁴ 15,000 in refugee camps in Sudan, and a total of between 100,000-150,000 for the whole famine zone for the whole period. (Deaths in the resettlement program will be considered in chapter 12.)

Deaths among the general population are open to greater problems of estimation -- we know neither the size of the population, the number affected by famine, the death rate in normal years, the length during which the death rate was raised on account of famine, nor the death rate during the famine. Nevertheless, some approximations can be made.

The total country-wide affected population during 1984/5, according to the RRC, was 6,098,000. In the north, there were 872,000 in Eritrea, 1,790,900 in Wollo,³⁵ 376,500 in Gonder and 200,000 in northern Shewa. The real figure for Tigray was at least one million more than the official estimate of 1,331,900; including these would give a total affected in the

³³ A study by the Ethiopian statistician Asmerom Kidane was subject to censorship (see chapter 12) and independent attempts to do demographic surveys met with official obstruction.

³⁴ John Mitchell, "Review of the Famine Relief Operation in Wollo Administrative Region, Ethiopia," mimeo, 1986, p. 20.

³⁵ Later the figure for Wollo was revised upwards to over 2.5 million.

north of about 3.3 million. It can be assumed that death rates rose among the affected populations of Tigray and north Wollo a year before they began to rise elsewhere. In 1983/4, 1.1 million were affected in north Wollo and about two million in Tigray. This gives a total of about 6.4 million "affected person years."

The death rate in normal times in the north of Ethiopia is approximately 20 per thousand per year.

For death rates during the famine, the following fragments of data are available:

- * An independent survey in 1987, which found that 30 per cent of sampled households had lost an average of 1.6 family members during 1984 and 1985.³⁶ Assuming an average household of five members, this implies a death rate of about 96 per thousand for the two years. This is consistent with one year of normal mortality and one year of a raised rate of 76 per thousand.
- * An *ad hoc* Red Cross survey result, which indicates that 51 per cent of households in central Wollo lost one or more family members during the famine.³⁷ On varying assumptions, this implies a death rate of 102 or 163 per thousand for the whole famine.
- * A survey among refugees arriving in Sudan, which indicated a death rate of 70 per thousand in the preceding year (up to and including migration).³⁸
- * A large-scale survey in northern Shewa in late 1985, which found death rates of 96–108 per thousand over a short period for a large population.³⁹

³⁶ Dessalegn Rahmato, 1987, pp. 3, 131.

³⁷ Cited in Dessalegn Rahmato, 1987, p. 131.

³⁸ Cutler, 1988, p. 348.

³⁹ Dr Mack Otten of Save the Children Federation (US), quoted by Seaman, 1987.

- * A compilation of data by REST in early 1985 which indicated that 1,500 people in Tigray were dying each day, implying a death rate equivalent to 110 per thousand.⁴⁰
- * A survey in resettlement sites done by a professional demographer (the *only* such professional survey) which found a peak death rate of about 115–123 per thousand.⁴¹

Famine mortality usually shows a seasonal variation, with the peak generally about one and a half times higher than the average for the year. The peak of about 100 per thousand implies a yearly rate of about 70 per thousand, which is consonant with the findings of surveys covering a longer period. The excess above normal which can be attributed to famine is therefore about 50 per thousand. With 6.4 million person years "affected", this implies 320,000 deaths attributable to famine during 1983–5. Deaths in camps over and above the general famine death rate need to be added. 100,000 people died in camps, about five times the number if the people had remained in the countryside. Adding this extra 80,000, the total is 400,000.

More pessimistic estimates would expand the affected population and raise the average famine death rate, each by 25 per cent, and give the higher estimate for deaths in camps, resulting in an estimate of 590,000 famine deaths. These figures concur with the best-informed contemporary estimates, which argue for a total of about 500,000 famine deaths for the period 1982–6.⁴²

How many of the deaths can be attributed to the counter-insurgency methods of the Ethiopian government and other punitive measures implemented to the cost of rural people? This question cannot be answered in anything but the crudest terms. The counter-insurgency strategy caused the famine to strike one year earlier than would otherwise have been the case, and forced people to migrate to relief shelters and refugee camps. The economic war against the peasants caused the famine to spread to other areas of the country. If the famine had struck only in 1984/5, and only affected the "core" areas of Tigray and north Wollo (3.1 million affected

⁴⁰ REST were assuming a population of Tigray and its borderlands amounting to five million.

⁴¹ Asmerom Kidane, "Demographic Consequences of the Ethiopian Famine," *Demography*, 26, (1989) pp. 515–22.

⁴² Cutler, 1988, p. 437.

people), and caused only one quarter of the number to migrate to camps, the death toll would have been 175,000 (on the optimistic assumptions) and 273,000 (on the pessimistic assumptions). Thus between 225,000 and 317,000 deaths -- rather more than half of those caused by the famine -- can be blamed on the government's human rights violations.

In addition, deaths from famine occurred in the south -- in Harerghe, Bale, Sidamo and in Wollaita district of Shewa. These deaths almost certainly numbered in the tens of thousands. Government counter-insurgency strategies including military offensives and forced relocation⁴³ were instrumental in creating the famine in the three southern provinces, and its agricultural policy was crucial in Wollaita.

⁴³ Described in chapter 5.

10. WAR AND THE USE OF RELIEF AS A WEAPON IN ERITREA, 1984-88

In October 1984, the famine and war in Ethiopia took a dramatic turn, with four simultaneous developments. On October 23, the BBC screened a film of the starvation in Korem, unleashing a juggernaut of international aid that completely transformed the famine, which had up to that point been developing without large amounts of external relief aid. Secondly, on October 27, the army in Eritrea launched its largest offensive for two-and-a-half years, which was to be followed up by an even larger series of offensives during 1985. Thirdly, the Ethiopian government launched its principal response to the famine, the resettlement program. Finally, an ambitious villagization program was launched in Harerghe, as a counter-insurgency measure against the OLF, which presaged the program in other parts of the country. These four developments are the subject of this and the following three chapters.

The huge relief operation that swung into action meant that after October 1984, control of relief was a major component of the military strategy of both the government and the rebel fronts. The systematic use (and denial) of food relief for military ends was the most notable aspect of government military strategy that also included extraordinarily sustained and widespread brutality against civilians.

In the southeast in 1979-82, and Eritrea in 1982, the government had tried with mixed success to obtain humanitarian assistance from the international community to use for the pacification element of its counter-insurgency strategy. Between 1982 and 1984, these aid flows were drying up, and the repatriation initiative was not meeting with much success. After October 1984, the massive inflow of relief allowed the government to return, when it wished to do so, to its preferred counter-insurgency strategy.

This chapter focuses on the continued war in Eritrea, and the role of aid in the government's counter-insurgency strategy. As elements of that strategy were common to both Eritrea and Tigray, some details concerning the aid programs in Tigray will also be included. It ends with the EPLF victory at Afabet in March 1988. Building on less spectacular military gains over the previous six months, this battle marked a turning point in the war -- from then onwards, both EPLF and TPLF had gained military supremacy.

The Aid Response

The publicity suddenly given to the famine represented an earthquake in the relief world. From donating only \$11 million to Ethiopia in Financial Year (FY) 1983 and \$23 million in FY 1984, USAID increased its donations to \$350 million in FY 1985. The members of the European Community increased their donations from \$111 million in (calendar) 1983 to \$213 million in 1984 and \$325 million in 1985. Overall assistance rose from \$361 million in 1983 to \$417 million in 1984 and \$784 million in 1985.¹ 975,000 metric tonnes (MT) of food was delivered to the government side between November 1984 and October 1985. About 80,000 MT went to EPLF- and TPLF-held areas.

Dilemmas in Feeding the North

In October 1984 the aid donors faced an acute dilemma: whether to channel relief through the government or rebel side.

In December, diplomats and relief agency staff in Addis Ababa estimated that the government had access to only 22 per cent of the famine-stricken population.² The Eritrean Relief Association (ERA) and the Relief Society of Tigray (REST) had access to most of the remainder, using "cross-border" routes from Sudan, and travelling only at night to avoid aerial bombardment. The Emergency Relief Desk, a consortium of humanitarian agencies set up in 1981, acted as an intermediary between the donors and ERA and REST, avoiding many of the problems that those donors would have encountered had they implemented the programs themselves.³ Nevertheless, the great majority of the assistance was channelled through the RRC and voluntary agencies working alongside it: according to most estimates, they received over 90 per cent of the money and food.

The US shared with other donors a preference for working on the government side; it was quicker, cheaper, and more public. However, unlike every other major aid donor (save the International Committee of the Red

¹ Figures from Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, "Geographical Distribution of Financial Flows to Developing Countries," 1984-1986.

² Paul Vallely, "Famine: Russia and US on Collusion Course," *The Times*, London, June 4, 1985.

³ Barbara Hendrie, "Cross-Border Relief Operations in Eritrea and Tigray," *Disasters*, 13, (1990), p. 355.

Cross [ICRC]), USAID was the only donor to contemplate giving substantial support to the cross-border operation. Because of the politics of the relief program, USAID did not in the end give the support that it promised, and the cross-border operation remained grossly under-supplied during 1984 and 1985.

The US donated 5,000 MT to ERA and REST in April 1984 for the cross-border operation, a further 23,000 MT in November, and another "substantial" donation in December. In September, USAID initiated discussions to launch a much larger cross-border program, possibly of a size to eclipse the program run from the government side. According to documents obtained by the journalist Paul Vallely, several plans were mooted; the most ambitious involved spending over \$100 million and building a road from Sudan into central Tigray; the least ambitious involved donating 240 trucks to ERA and REST.⁴ Only in late 1985 did assistance in the form of 150 trucks finally materialize. Throughout most of 1985, REST was still operating a battered fleet of 55 aging Fiat trucks, assisted by a smaller fleet of ICRC vehicles.

Repeated demands by diplomats, humanitarian agencies and the rebel fronts for a "food truce" to allow non-governmental agencies to supply relief to the hungry in all parts of the country were consistently rejected by the government. In December 1984, Acting Foreign Minister Tibebe Bekele rejected an approach from the US Charge d'Affaires, saying that it amounted to a proposal "to make an arrangement with criminals."⁵ Government officials consistently rejected the suggestion that there were areas of the country which could not be reached by the RRC.

In these circumstances USAID used the cross-border operation as a bargaining tool with the government: unless greater access was provided from the government side, the US would throw major resources into the cross-border operation. However, this strategy was undermined by various factors, including:

- * The lack of a suitable private relief organization to take on the role of implementing partner for USAID's relief food (CARE was approached but refused in March);
- * The unilateral donation of resources to the government side by all other major donors, notably the UN;

⁴ Vallely, *The Times*, London, June 4, 1985.

⁵ Quoted in: David A. Korn, *Ethiopia, the United States and the Soviet Union*, London, 1986, p. 135.

- * The April 7 popular uprising in Sudan, which overthrew President Jaafar Nimeiri (a close ally of the US and at the time very hostile to Mengistu) and brought to power the Transitional Military Council, which hoped for improved relations with the Ethiopian government;⁶
- * The need for the relief program to be public, so that the television viewers in the US could see that their government was acting. The Ethiopian government was totally intransigent and refused to concede any legitimacy at all to the cross-border program, so that it had to be clandestine. It therefore could not be open to the televised visits of US politicians, journalists and media personalities.

Two other factors helped to swing the debate in favor of the government side. One was that the army's military successes in the Eighth Offensive in Tigray between February and April meant that many more areas became accessible from the government side (see next chapter). The second was that the US State Department realised that neither EPLF nor TPLF were ideologically suited to playing the role of "contras" against the Communist government in Addis Ababa. In favor of the cross-border operation was the fear that a large refugee influx into Sudan would destabilize that country, which remained a western ally.⁷

Thus, due to essentially political considerations, the cross-border operation fell out of favor with USAID -- though a reduced level of support for it continued. Instead, the "Food for the North" initiative was proposed in March, whereby US voluntary agencies would work on the government side. World Vision was selected for Tigray and Catholic Relief Services (CRS) for Eritrea. The proposal and the decision to support it were made before the full cooperation of the Ethiopian government was obtained; this meant that throughout 1985 and afterwards the government consistently had the upper hand in determining the conditions under which aid was provided in Eritrea and Tigray. Therefore, not only did the cross-border operation fail to receive adequate support, but its value as a bargaining counter with the government was never properly realized.

⁶Sudanese-Ethiopian relations dramatically improved during the rest of 1985, but deteriorated during 1986 and 1987 as the Sudanese civil war escalated and the Ethiopian government continued to provide military support to the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Army. Sudanese relations with the fronts improved as those with the government soured.

⁷Until January 1985 the Sudan government officially blamed food shortages on the refugee influx, denying the existence of a domestic food problem.

Food Relief and Survival Strategies

The politics of food assistance to Ethiopia over this period have received much attention from journalists, relief workers and scholars.⁸ This chapter is concerned with the problem of famine more generally. Even in the worst famines in Africa, food relief provided by humanitarian agencies or governments plays a relatively minor role in the survival of the people. For example, the enormous relief effort to the famine-stricken Sudanese region of Darfur in 1984/5 succeeded in providing no more than about twelve per cent of the total food consumed by the people of that region during the famine, and had little appreciable effect on their survival chances.⁹ Similarly in Ethiopia, famine relief was at best the last ten per cent which assisted rural people in surviving. Moreover, in contrast to other survival strategies such as gathering wild foods, trading, or taking paid labor, the provision of relief food was unreliable and was often accompanied by unpleasant side-effects such as the need to walk long distances, absent oneself from the farm at critical stages in the agricultural cycle, or live in a disease-ridden relief shelter. Thus, while the provision or interruption of relief supplies was vitally important for the people of northern Ethiopia after October 1984, other aspects of the counter-insurgency strategy which adversely affected the survival strategies of the affected population were, as during the previous years, even more important.

The fact that relief assistance is much less important than "normal" economic activities is significant. While it does not make the disruption of relief supplies any less morally reprehensible, it draws attention to the fact that other actions which create famine are even more deserving of moral outrage.

The October 1984 Offensive

Within the same week that the BBC film of Korem was broadcast, the Ethiopian government launched a major offensive in Eritrea. The following year was to equal 1982 in terms of the suffering of civilian Eritreans on account of the war; it was to surpass the horrors of that year because rural people had to contend with the problems of famine as well.

⁸ The best such book remains: Peter Gill, *A Year in the Death of Africa*, London, 1986.

⁹ Alex de Waal, "Is Famine Relief Irrelevant to Rural People?" *IDS Bulletin*, 20.2, Sussex, April 1988, pp. 63-9.

By October 1984, the 60,000 new conscripts drafted earlier that year had finished their military training and were ready for battle. The total size of the regular army was 210,000, with 170,000 militia. Meanwhile there had been a build up of armor -- the army now had 750 main battle tanks and 130 combat aircraft. These new forces were soon to be deployed: for eleven of the next thirteen months, the army was actively engaged in major offensives, its most sustained military action since 1978.

On October 27, 1984, the Ethiopian army launched a large offensive which lasted until January. This included the familiar elements of indiscriminate bombing and shelling of civilian targets as a prelude to ground attack. The market at Molki, Seraye district, was bombed on October 2, killing 42 marketgoers and wounding 90. In the EPLF base area of Orota, a school was bombed. Villages close to the EPLF front lines were subjected to indiscriminate shelling during a period of two weeks, and there was further aerial bombardment towards the end of the offensive in January.

After the fighting stopped there was little quiet in Eritrea. In April the army attacked Nacfa, and there were numerous small engagements.

The Food for the North Initiative, 1985

The large inflow of aid in general, and the Food for the North Initiative in particular, gave the Ethiopian government a new resource which it began to use in the middle of 1985. The government preferred to have the aid consigned to its own RRC, which could then utilize the aid as it pleased. However, when some of the main aid donors, particularly the US, insisted on using voluntary agencies, the government saw that it had advantages in this arrangement too. The government knew that few relief agencies would have the courage to speak out about human rights abuses or the role of relief in the war, particularly if it threatened to shut down their programs in reprisal. The publicity which the agencies would draw could thus be used in the government's favor, and to the disadvantage of the rebel fronts.

Paul Vallely noted some of the ironies of the Food for the North Initiative:

The relief agencies were pleased. So was the Dergue, because the deal would provide a programme of pacification in the rebel areas newly under its control. Food could be distributed without the risk that it might fall into the hands of the rebel army. Moreover, the presence of western aid workers in the area would constrain the vigour of any [rebel] counter-offensive. Having got the Soviet Union to finance the

operation, Colonel Mengistu had now got the US to finance its consolidation with food handouts.¹⁰

After an initial reluctance to let the Food for the North program go ahead, the government allowed CRS into Areza and Barentu. The CRS target was to open two more centers in Keren and Agordat and distribute food to 200,000 people. Over the following months, government enthusiasm for the program grew.

The 1985 Offensives

In July 1985, the EPLF took the important garrison town of Barentu. The CRS feeding program, which had opened a few months beforehand, was stopped. The government now had no presence in western Eritrea, where the only functioning relief programs were those organized by ERA, bringing in food cross-border from Sudan.

In August the government launched a huge offensive -- equalling the Red Star campaign of 1982 in terms of numbers of troops deployed. In two phases, it lasted until late October. In terms of losses by the EPLF, it was probably the costliest campaign -- estimates for casualties among the EPLF range from 2,000 to 4,000 and higher.¹¹ One aim of the campaign was to disrupt the supply routes from Sudan used by ERA.

While the offensive was waged, the army commandeered all transport in Eritrea. RRC distributions in Eritrea and Tigray came almost to a halt -- falling from 14,122 MT in July to 2,069 MT in August.

Within the space of a few weeks, Barentu was recaptured by the army, which went on to retake Tessenei, held by the EPLF for 18 months, and a key town for access to Sudan. The whole cross-border route through Kassala was closed on August 25, leaving ERA only the longer and more difficult route from Port Sudan. A large irrigated farm nearby at Ali Ghidir was also captured. ERA estimated that 20,000 MT of food aid was lost to the army. 30,000 refugees fled across the border to Sudan, and 190,000 people were internally displaced in Eritrea. 22 villages were destroyed or abandoned because of aerial bombardment or artillery shelling. There were credible reports of reprisals taken against civilian residents of Barentu and the surrounding villages, in which 37 people were killed.

¹⁰ *The Times*, London, June 4, 1985.

¹¹ Roy Pateman, *Eritrea: Even the Stones are Burning*, Trenton, NJ, 1990, p. 140; *Africa Confidential*, 26.30, October 30, 1985.

Aerial bombardment continued throughout this period. On September 20 and 22, the ERA camp for displaced people at Solomuna in Sahel was bombed and 20 adults and nine children were killed. The village of Badme was also bombed, killing nine.

EPLF Strategy

The 1985 offensives were a major but temporary setback for the EPLF. As in Tigray, the experience of the government war strategy and its role in creating famine hardened popular support for the front. Between 1984 and 1987, EPLF strength rose from 12,000 to about 30,000, and the numbers of militia were increased.¹²

The EPLF responded to the government advance of 1985 by consolidating its control in northwest Eritrea, expanding its forces, and protecting its relief routes. In late 1987, it began to go on the offensive, disrupting government supply lines, and attacking convoys. In December the EPLF overran the army's main defensive positions at Nacfa, a prelude to the devastating attack on Afabet in March.

Pacification in Eritrea 1986-7 I: The Army

The military strategy adopted in 1986-7 was a familiar one: constant military patrols and small-scale offensives, bombing "everything that moves" in the EPLF-controlled areas, and a continued program of villagization and pacification elsewhere.

The army in Eritrea exacted many bloody reprisals against the civilian population. The following are some reported incidents:

- * March 1986: Senafe, Akele Guzai: two killed when a soldier threw a grenade into a crowd.
- * June 1986: lower Anseba and Dembezan areas, Hamassien: several villages looted by soldiers.
- * August 6, 1986: Hamazu, Southern Eritrea: 140 killed, 100 injured by soldiers.

¹² NOVIB, "War and Famine in Eritrea and Tigray: An Investigation into the Arms Deliveries to the Struggling Parties in Eritrea and Tigray," Zeist, the Netherlands, 1991, p. 12.

- * September 1986: Adibara, Barka: five peasants killed in retaliation for a land mine explosion which destroyed an army truck.
- * September 23-4, 1986: Akele Guzai: 24 peasants executed, 20 arrested.
- * June 24, 1987: Adi Hadid, Akele Guzai: six killed.
- * June 26, 1987: Haikota and Adi Shimel, Barka: 29 farmers were ploughing their land when troops came and took them to Adi Shimel, where 16 were killed and Haikota, where ten were killed.
- * July 1987: Anseba, Senhit: 16 people killed and 106 cattle burned by soldiers.

Other forms of harassment continued. In one reported incident, a man in Adikuta, Akele Guzai, was ordered to pay a 3,000 Birr fine after seven of his goats stepped on land mines, which detonated. A court ordered that the fine be paid to compensate the army for "wasted mines."

The University of Leeds assessment team which visited Eritrea in late 1987 obtained figures for losses and destruction due to the war.¹³ The figures indicate that since the beginning of 1986:

- * 22,500 hectares of land had been destroyed by military action or rendered unusable by land mines.
- * 3,500 tons of food had been confiscated by the army.
- * 43,900 domestic animals had been stolen by the army (mostly sheep and goats, but including substantial numbers of pack animals, cattle and camels).
- * 1,500 civilians had been killed, 3,600 imprisoned, and 200 raped by soldiers.
- * 1.3 million Birr of money and property had been looted by the army.

¹³ The figures came from ERA and were not therefore independent; some incidents contained in them have been cross-checked, but no full independent check has been possible.

- * 2,500 homes had been destroyed.¹⁴

Pacifying Eritrea II: The Air Force

Bombing in Eritrea continued constantly. Some attacks included:

- * August 4, 1986: Dekidashin: three civilians killed, two wounded.
- * September 15, 1986: Egela Hatsin, Akele Guzai: five killed, 20 wounded.
- * September 20, 1986: Ela Tsaeda, Sahel: one killed.
- * January 31, 1987: Hawasheit relief center: four civilians killed, including a four year old girl.

On at least one occasion, the MiGs crossed the Sudan border on their bombing missions. In August 1987, an agricultural camp was attacked and one woman was killed and five wounded.¹⁵

Pacifying Eritrea III: Relief

Relief food was a major strategic element in Eritrea from 1985 onwards. The traditional relationship of regular and guerrilla armies to the population -- that they rely on the people to give them food -- was reversed. Both the government and the EPLF had more food resources at their disposal, and used it to obtain the support of and control over the population. That, however, is where the symmetry ended. The logic of the government's position, as an unpopular presence trying to subdue an unwilling populace, meant that food relief was used to restrict people, as the more acceptable side of a violent and impoverishing counter-insurgency strategy. The logic of the EPLF's position was that it already enjoyed widespread popular support, and it wanted to feed the people in the areas it controlled in order to prevent them migrating to government-held areas or to Sudan to look for food.

¹⁴ Figures reproduced in: Lionel Cliffe, "The Impact of War and the Response to it in Different Agrarian Systems in Eritrea," *Development and Change*, 20, (1989) p. 377.

¹⁵ Sudan News Agency, August 12, 1987.

After the success of the August 1985 offensive in Eritrea, the government's attitude to the Food for the North Initiative warmed. "They have done a complete volte face and are encouraging PVOs [private voluntary agencies] to expand it still further" said Richard Eney of USAID.¹⁶ CRS moved back into Barentu. The number of distribution points was increased, including Keren. Critics of the program argued that "when Ethiopian troops advance on a place like Barentu, and then a few days later an American voluntary agency comes in to distribute US food and medical supplies, you become hard-pressed not to see this as an odd kind of coordination."¹⁷ CRS and USAID argued that the humanitarian necessity of providing food overrode any political-military considerations, that the EPLF was happy to see Eritrean people fed, no matter who by, and that a few months of emergency feeding would not win hearts and minds after 25 years of bloody warfare.¹⁸

The relief given in Eritrea was generous, in contrast to the years 1983-4. However, outside the towns, it was tied to the continuing program of the creation of protected villages. In order to receive food, rural people had to bring their whole families, and register, often paying a fee of 5 Birr in order to do so. The food was then given in frequent small amounts, making it impossible for the family to return home with food.

Other means were used to control the population in distribution centers: most were protected villages, with curfews enforced and movement restricted, with only one or two permitted entrances, and ringed by anti-personnel land mines.

One way in which the aid was used to draw people into protected villages was by threatening and harassing those who tried to obtain aid from ERA distribution centers. Said Ali Mohamed was interviewed by Barbara Hendrie at an ERA center in March 1986.¹⁹

In my village we are completely encircled by the enemy. The Dergue is in all directions; we drink from the same well, you can say. We are afraid. All of the time they take our camels, our goats, our animals.

¹⁶ Quoted in: Jonathan B. Tucker, "The Politics of Famine: US Foreign Policy in Ethiopia, 1982-1985," mimeo, 1985, p. 55.

¹⁷ Tucker, 1985, p. 49.

¹⁸ Tucker, 1985, pp. 49-50.

¹⁹ Barbara Hendrie, "Field Report -- Eritrea," Emergency Relief Desk, Khartoum, April 1986, Appendix B.

The food I get here, I will not take it home to my village, because if I do, and the Dergue finds out, they will kill us. So I will hide my food in valleys or in the hills and will travel to the hiding place from my village to take some food at a time, daily or weekly.

The enemy has prevented us from getting food before, so this is the first time I have come here.

Securing Garrisons and Roads

A supplementary function of the program, for the army, was to keep roads open and give protection to military convoys. On roads where the EPLF was known to be active, the army would often send civilian buses or relief convoys, and only if they got through without trouble, would they send military vehicles. Some convoys were mixed relief and military, and often the identity of different vehicles was unclear.

This policy inevitably led to tragedy. On July 13, 1988, a civilian bus travelling between Asmara and Tigray struck a land mine and caught fire. According to the government, 25 civilian passengers were killed immediately and nine died later. Relief vehicles also suffered.

EPLF Attacks on Relief Vehicles

In August–September 1987, two simultaneous developments meant that relief vehicles became targets for attack by EPLF ambushes. One was the expansion of EPLF military activity further southward and eastward, so that it threatened major roads. The second was the drought of the summer of 1987, which meant that relief activities needed to be greatly stepped up.

On October 23, 1987, the EPLF attacked a convoy of 34 trucks south of Asmara. EPLF fighters drained the fuel tanks, poured the fuel over the vehicles, and set them alight. One driver was also killed. 23 of the trucks carried relief food, much of it supplied by BandAid, and the incident attracted worldwide condemnation. The EPLF claimed that three trucks carried arms. This claim has never been substantiated. However, the relief vehicles were travelling in a mixed convoy, which included commercial and government vehicles. The only marking identifying the relief trucks were small stickers on the doors, which were invisible from a distance.

The attack on the convoy caused a flurry of activity in the humanitarian community aimed to ensure that it did not happen again. Over the following week, there was an attempt to negotiate a "safe passage" agreement with the government. This was immediately rejected by the

government, whereupon the EPLF said it would continue to attack convoys to which it had not given prior clearance.

Less ambitiously, there were consultations between EPLF, Emergency Relief Desk and BandAid in Khartoum.²⁰ A proposal was worked out whereby relief trucks would be much more clearly marked (with large flags indicating the beginning and end of the relief "bloc" in a convoy) and the EPLF would be warned in advance of the movements of such convoys. The EPLF for its part promised to give "instructions to the army units to separate military from relief and to take all possible precautions to ensure that relief materials and relief transportation are not harmed."²¹ The details of this proposal were passed via the British Embassy in Addis Ababa to Mr Michael Priestley, then head of the UN Emergency Office for Ethiopia (UNEOE), who summarily rejected the plan.

Thereafter, the safety of the relief vehicles depended on the efficiency of an informal process of communication between the humanitarian agencies in Asmara and Addis Ababa, Penny Jenden, director of BandAid in London, Emergency Relief Desk in Khartoum, and the EPLF.

Over the following months there were more attacks on relief vehicles, but none on convoys of marked relief vehicles unaccompanied by military vehicles. In November, there were two attacks on convoys, which later transpired to have not been carrying relief. In December, a convoy of 13 vehicles was destroyed, and on January 15, 1988, another convoy, including relief vehicles, was burned near Massawa. While the relief trucks were unmarked and were accompanied by military vehicles, there is no evidence that the attacking EPLF force tried to separate out the military and relief vehicles as they had earlier promised.

The attacks attracted international publicity. Both the EPLF and the government confined the argument to the issue of famine relief, which ensured that the government would be the winner, at least in terms of international public opinion: the EPLF undoubtedly carried the responsibility for destroying the relief supplies. A more rounded assessment of the ethics of the EPLF attacks on relief demands attention to the government's whole pacification strategy. The relief operations were but a small part of an overall government strategy. The ten per cent contribution to survival provided by relief was more than offset by the government attack on the other 90 per cent of the existing economy, and the relief was itself an integral part of the pacification program that was undermining rural people's

²⁰ ICRC also participated but withdrew pending its "Open Roads for Survival" initiative (see chapter 11).

²¹ EPLF press release, December 2, 1987.

ability to provision themselves. Ensuring the "neutrality" of relief deliveries would have helped only a little while such an overall military strategy persisted. The EPLF attacks caused people to go hungry, but they helped make the pacification strategy less viable.

In March 1988, the EPLF won its greatest ever military victory at Afabet after a huge three-day battle in which it defeated a force of 15,000 men and over 50 tanks. It was the turning point in the war, and has been compared to the Viet Minh victory at Dien Bien Phu. However, such was the international preoccupation with food relief -- a preoccupation partly orchestrated by the government -- that a headline in *The Times* of London of March 31 ran: "Stepped up guerrilla raids threaten food deliveries."

Diversion of Aid to the Military

Frequent allegations were made during the early 1980s of large-scale diversion of food to the military in Ethiopia. The evidence was largely the testimony of refugees in Sudan, and visitors to EPLF- and TPLF-controlled areas who saw relief food stockpiled in the stores of captured garrisons. In March 1983, these allegations reached a new level with a report in the *Sunday Times* of London under the classic headline: "Starving babies' food sold to buy Soviet arms." Repeated visits by high-level representatives of donor countries, including Canada, the UK the European Community and (a year later) the US, failed to find any substance to these allegations, besides odd occasions of "loans" of food to the army. In late 1985, the UN estimated the rate of diversion at about five per cent, which is considered low under the circumstances. However, the diversion of this amount of food would, from 1985 onwards, have been sufficient to feed 300,000-400,000 men -- the entire armed forces.

Government officials were frank about the practice of feeding soldiers. In both Eritrea and Tigray (though apparently less so elsewhere) large amounts of relief food were used to feed the locally-conscripted militia. Dawit Wolde Giorgis, head of the RRC, reports a "request" from Mengistu to divert food to the army in June 1984:

I understood the problem of the military. The common soldier was the victim of government policies just as much as the peasant. Soldiers were dying by the hundreds every week in the various civil wars. I didn't want them to suffer more due to food shortages. I now suggested that it would be easier for the RRC to divert food to the peasant militias rather than to the military establishment on the government payroll. These militias recruited from the peasantry were not paid; they were

simply trained and ordered out to fight. I felt that feeding them was like feeding peasants.²²

Relief allocations in Eritrea and Tigray were made by a Drought Emergency Committee, composed of a range of government officials, only one of whom represented the RRC. Reportedly, allocations to the militia were made against the wishes of the RRC representative in Eritrea.

Later, government Deputy Administrator for Eritrea, Yishak Tsegai, told a reporter that the militia are "given priority because there is no fixed salary or privileges.... 20,000 peasants are armed on the side of the government."²³ These militia came to be known as *milisha sirnai* or "wheat militia" because of their method of payment.

In addition, about 15,000 militia in Tigray were fed. A visitor to Tigray discovered evidence of this in Meqele in March 1989, after its capture by the TPLF:

Everyone I spoke to said that the RRC only gave food to their own militias and their families, not to the poor. We found indications of this in the looted RRC offices where file after file was titled "militia of ... receiving assistance" with lists of beneficiaries.²⁴

Extensive evidence of the use of food aid by army garrisons was discovered by journalist Peter Worthington, who visited the garrison of Afabet shortly after its capture by the EPLF.

I went to the Ethiopian army kitchen and store depots to see what had been left in the hasty departure -- and found, stacked against a wall, a number of 50 kilogram sacks of flour, marked "C.I.D.A. [Canadian International Development Agency] Gift of Canada." Serving as curtains to the shelves were other sacks that had once contained Canadian wheat.

... I visited a dozen hole-in-wall shops, run mostly by Moslems and stocked with items such as Kiwi shoe polish, soap, toilet paper, colored

²² Dawit Wolde Giorgis, *Red Tears: War, Revolution and Famine in Ethiopia*, Trenton, NJ, 1989, pp. 157-8.

²³ Jane Perlez, *New York Times*, February 15, 1990. The real figure was closer to 50,000.

²⁴ Jennie Street, "Report of Field Trip to Non-Government Held Areas of Tigray, Ethiopia, March 1989," Khartoum, Emergency Relief Desk, 1989, p. 34.

hair oil, sardines, banana chewing gum from Saudi Arabia — and bags of Canadian wheat flour.

Every store, literally, had stacks of flour, marked C.I.D.A. Questions were answered evasively. They were keeping it for someone else ... Yes, it was for sale in the markets of Asmara ... no, it wasn't for sale — unless someone wanted to buy it ... the army helped them to get it, sold to shopkeepers on the sly, everyone making a small profit.²⁵

Worthington also discovered cooking oil and other foodstuffs donated as aid in the garrison. In 1989, the sale of relief food by the army and militia in Eritrea had reached such a scale that a brisk trade was being conducted across the battle lines into Tigray, where it was contributing a significant amount to the diet of people and keeping food prices low.

Despite its claims to the contrary, the UN in Ethiopia was in fact well-informed about the large scale diversion of relief to the militia. In June 1985, an international food monitor in Eritrea documented that militiamen were regularly receiving 90 kilograms of wheat per month. Of this, they kept about half for consumption, and sold the other half for money. The diversion was concealed by entering six names on the ration list for every militiaman. Often the family of the militiamen received regular rations as well. Ordinary civilians on the ration list received between 10 and 20 kilograms, and when food was short, they received nothing: the militia received priority in the allocation of supplies. The food monitor estimated that approximately one third of the relief in Eritrea was actually being directed to the militia. Mr Kurt Jansson, the UN coordinator for the emergency in Addis Ababa, chose not to publicize this well-documented report, and denied press reports that referred to the diversion of food. Later, Mr Jansson admitted that it had occurred but said that feeding militiamen "could not be considered wrong" as the militiamen would have received food anyway, had they remained as ordinary farmers.²⁶

It is quite possible that the total diversion of food aid to the army and militia did not amount to more than five to ten per cent of the total.²⁷

²⁵ Peter Worthington, *The Sunday Sun*, Toronto, April 24, 1988. There are numerous other similar accounts dating back to the 1970s.

²⁶ Kurt Jansson, Michael Harris and Angela Penrose, *The Ethiopian Famine*, London, 1987, p. 56.

²⁷ In 1985 the US General Accounting Office estimated the rate of diversion at 4.3 per cent, but did not take into account the feeding of the militia.

This however obscures the fact that the percentages were much higher in the critically-affected areas of the north; that even when the food reached the hungry it played a strategic military role; and the assistance program as a whole gave much needed foreign currency to the government.

Perhaps the most important way in which the relief effort contributed to the government's war effort and indeed survival was through the exchange rate. All foreign assistance was exchanged into Ethiopian Birr at the rate of 2.07 to the dollar, despite the fact that the real market rate was two to three times higher. The government thereby taxed all currency transactions for relief by 100-150 per cent, in addition to port charges, import duties and license fees. This came to be the major source of foreign exchange for the government.

The relief effort also supported the fronts. This took several forms. One was the feeding of militiamen, who were in other respects poor farmers, and who received rations from their local *baitos* which distributed to the poor on behalf of ERA and REST. Another was beneficiaries contributing some relief supplies to fighters, without direct coercion, but undoubtedly with some social pressure. The main strategic benefit the fronts obtained from relief food was that the people were able to stay in their villages and were not obliged to migrate to Sudan.

Allegations of the straightforward re-consignment of relief to the fronts -- including fighters, support personnel, field hospitals, and prisoner of war camps -- have been made by the Ethiopian government, defectors from the fronts, and Mr Jansson of UNEOE.²⁸ They have never been confirmed. The diversion of five per cent of the cross-border food would have been sufficient to supply food to about half the EPLF's and TPLF's fighters. With the exception of ICRC programs, internationally-donated food travelled only in ERA and REST vehicles, and was distributed by locally-appointed distribution committees. While international agencies frequently sent food monitors to observe the transport and distribution of certain consignments of food (indeed the programs in rebel-held areas were more intensively monitored than those on the government side), independent comprehensive accounting of donations was never requested by the donors.²⁹

ERA and REST exchanged foreign currency in Saudi Arabia at rates close to the free market rate, though there was one incident in late 1989

²⁸ Jansson, 1987, p. 52.

²⁹ The exception was the internal purchase of surplus foodgrains in Tigray, which was funded by USAID in 1984, 1989 and 1990, and on all occasions the purchases were actually made by US monitors.

and early 1990 in which a significant divergence occurred, in the order of 40 per cent. When the discrepancy was discovered by an American monitor, ERA apologized and returned the additional funds to the donors. International aid to the rebel side was much less than to the government, and proportionately certainly contributed much less to the fronts' war effort.

Famine Continues

Almost all the factors that led to the creation of famine in Eritrea in 1984 remained in place after 1985. The only exceptions were two years of better rainfall and a much larger supply of food aid. However, the pacification program and the war continued, and these continued to have the effects described in chapter 7. The underlying causes of the famine were not addressed, and when there was drought combined with a smaller relief program in 1989/90, severe famine returned.

A remarkable incident occurred in 1987 which illustrated the Ethiopian government's priorities. In the early 1980s, the Eritrean Public Health Program (EPHP), a civil branch of the EPLF, developed a small, low-cost field microscope. In 1984, production of the microscope began under license in London. At a cost of about one tenth of the existing commercially-available microscopes, and with a light-weight fold-away design, it had potential for use throughout the developing world. The World Health Organization (WHO) sponsored a series of tests, which the microscope passed, whereupon distribution began in several countries such as Brazil, Nicaragua and Indonesia. However in 1986 the Ethiopian government began to object to the microscope, which bore the initials of the EPHP, claiming that it was no more than part of a propaganda campaign launched by the "secessionist elements engaged in the rabid dismemberment of Ethiopia."³⁰ WHO and UNICEF were obliged to withdraw their endorsement of the microscope.

³⁰ Letter from H.E. Teferra Haile Selassie, Ethiopian Ambassador in London, to Dr Neil Anderson, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, September 1, 1986.

11. STARVING TIGRAY, 1984-88

Tigray during the last months of 1984 and the first half of 1985 represented the very nadir of the famine -- the most intense and widespread suffering in the entire country.

As before, a primary reason for the severity of the famine was the government's counter-insurgency strategy, including an extremely destructive army offensive. Unlike in other provinces, however, there was no significant relief program which could have offset this deliberately-induced suffering. The government deliberately withheld aid from the province which it held, and tried to prevent aid from reaching TPLF-held areas.

The Evacuation to Sudan

After the failure of the main 1984 harvest and the strangling effect of the government's intensified counter-insurgency strategies, Tigray faced unprecedented disaster. One way in which the TPLF responded to this was a mass evacuation of people to Sudan.

From 1980, the TPLF had an established policy of assisting impoverished migrants in western Tigray, through REST. In 1983, about 75,000 crossed the border to Sudan. In mid-1984, the food situation became so dire that the TPLF warned the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) that a much larger number of refugees would be soon arriving in Sudan. The predicted 300,000 did not in the event arrive, but about 189,000 did. UNHCR however had made contingency plans for only 50,000 new refugees (including Eritreans), and delayed implementing a program on the grounds that the refugees were drought victims and therefore had no "well-founded fear of persecution," that no appeal for assistance had been received by the Sudan government, and that it could not deal with the TPLF as a "non-recognized entity." Only when the Sudan government made belated requests for aid, having futilely tried to close the border in November 1984, and the aid bandwagon was already rolling, did UNHCR decide to treat the inflow as a "special case"; it then provided generous assistance.

TPLF and REST assisted the westward migration, which took 4-5 weeks on foot. Feeding centers were set up at key points along the route, and food was brought across the border from Sudan. From 5,000 new refugees in September 1984, the inflow increased to 25,000 in October and 87,000 in December, tailing off during 1985. A disagreement between EPLF and TPLF in March 1985 led to the former closing the key road from Tigray to Sudan, which runs through Eritrea, forcing the refugees to use the longer and more dangerous route through Gonder. Conditions in the camps in

Sudan were appalling, with some of the worst death rates ever recorded. An estimated 10,000–15,000 Tigrayan refugees died in camps in Sudan in 1984/5.

About 150,000 internally-displaced Tigrayans were assisted by REST in villages and shelters in western Tigray, and a further 500,000 migrated in search of employment in western Tigray and Gonder.

In March–April 1985, with assistance from TPLF and REST, the refugees began to return to prepare their fields for plowing. The return was resisted by most humanitarian agencies, including UNHCR (which until a year previously had been anxious to promote repatriation together with the Ethiopian government), which argued that the returnees faced certain death from starvation. But the refugees knew that unless they cultivated, they would remain perpetual paupers, and determined to return. At one point they staged a hunger strike in support of their right to go back. 70,000 left by the end of June, and almost all of the remainder over the following two years.

REST launched an ambitious (though underfunded) relief program to assist the returnees, and to provide relief to the hungry inside Tigray. Protecting the migration and relief routes became a major concern to the TPLF, which consequently had to alter its mode of warfare from pure guerrilla tactics to the consolidation of a "base area" in the west.

In retrospect, it is probably the case that the evacuation cost lives. The very high death rate while on the road and in Sudan caused by epidemic disease and exposure probably surpassed that which would have occurred had the migrants remained at home in their villages.

Some observers have compared the evacuation to Sudan with the resettlement program implemented by the government, equating it with a crime against humanity. This is inappropriate, for several reasons:

- * there is not a single piece of evidence to suggest that the evacuation was anything but voluntary; in fact there were more volunteers to migrate than the REST "pipeline" could handle;
- * it was temporary and was followed by a program of assisted return;
- * in late 1984 the TPLF was led to believe that generous humanitarian aid from the west would be forthcoming in the Sudanese refugee camps, and counted on that — the appalling conditions in the camps were thus to a large extent the fault of the western donors and UNHCR;
- * the TPLF never tried to implement such a program again.

The TPLF learned several lessons from the evacuation. One was the military lesson that a guerrilla movement could not survive in an area which was depopulated or disrupted by mass population movements, as the military setbacks of 1985 demonstrated. For this and for sound humanitarian reasons, TPLF-REST policy after 1985 was geared to maintaining the population in its home area. The second lesson was that the international community was an unreliable ally. Large-scale international aid to the cross-border operation and the refugee camps, on which so much had depended, never materialized. The TPLF turned inward; there was a prolonged internal debate on the respective virtues of "pragmatism" and textbook Leninism. The Leninists, who maintained that the TPLF should rely principally on mobilizing the local population, won, and the Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray, the vanguard party of the TPLF, was formed.

The Eighth Offensive in Tigray

The Eighth Offensive opened on February 17, 1985, and was waged for three months. The campaign was fought on two fronts: in Tembien in central Tigray, the heart of the famine zone, and in western Tigray, where harvest surpluses and employment were available, and where REST was bringing in food across the border from Sudan, and evacuating refugees to Sudan. While cutting off access to relief from REST was one of the main objectives of the offensive, it also had the familiar effects of cutting employment levels and trade flows, and disrupting agricultural activity. The offensive also delayed the implementation of the Food for the North Initiative.

The opening of the offensive coincided with the day before the tenth anniversary of the founding of the TPLF, and large crowds had gathered in various TPLF-held towns to celebrate. In an uncharacteristic lapse of security and/or intelligence, the TPLF allowed the crowds to congregate in daylight in Abi Adi. A doctor working for a foreign relief agency witnessed what happened next:

The celebrations were just getting under way in the marketplace when, at 16:55 hours, there was a sudden roar and two MiGs flew low over the square where we stood. People screamed and ran in all directions, their faces frozen in terror. The MiGs circled and returned three times to strafe the marketplace with machine guns and shells. The pilots then spotted large numbers of people running away across open ground down by the Tankwa River towards a eucalyptus grove, so the planes turned their attention to this area, strafing it repeatedly. We crouched next to a wall not far from the market square as the MiGs roared in to attack

again and again. A little girl ran screaming down the centre of the road nearby. After 15 minutes the planes left, leaving behind them a scene of appalling carnage. Initial estimates put the casualties at 25 dead and more than 100 wounded, 36 seriously. The number dead would have been far higher if not for the impressive efforts of first aid workers whose prompt treatment saved many lives.

There was a second attack the following day, in which the MiGs used high explosives to destroy the buildings of the town, which had now been almost completely evacuated, so casualties were much lighter: seven killed and 30 wounded. Several other Tigrayan towns were bombed during the same day. For the next two weeks, regular bombing raids continued. Abi Adi was bombed on two more occasions, as was the small town of Sambela, and 20 people were killed.

Then, on March 1, the ground offensive began, with troops moving out from Meqele and Korem. The Meqele column captured Abi Adi.¹ Many villages north of Abi Adi were attacked. In April, a survey of refugees in Sudan found that the majority came from this area, where destruction had been widespread.

Refugees, REST aid convoys and feeding centers were all targets of the bombing. In December, a column of refugees walking to Sudan was attacked near Shilalo in Shire, and 18 people were killed and 56 wounded. Between March 27-30, nine transit and feeding centers used by REST for giving assistance to migrants were bombed. 6,000 people had to be evacuated from the center at Zelazelay, which involved moving ill people and pregnant women from the clinic. The pharmacy and drug store was later destroyed in the attacks.

Meanwhile, the ground forces moved into western Tigray to cut the relief routes used by REST from Sudan -- also cutting the roads used by refugees. The Hermi Gorge link between central and western Tigray was cut. On April 23, the migrants' transit camp at Edaga Habrit was attacked and destroyed by ground forces; six days later Sheraro (an important relief center as well as a TPLF stronghold) was captured, though held only for ten days. REST was compelled to evacuate its field office nearby, which was occupied by the army a week later. Cross-border relief operations were suspended: a food convoy from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) had to return to Sudan. A TPLF counter-offensive in May recaptured these towns and villages, forcing the army to withdraw

¹ Many of the following details of the offensive are based on information compiled by Barbara Hendrie.

to Enda Selassie, but the relief effort had been plunged into chaos for a critical month.

There were further attacks on REST's supply routes in June and September, mounted from the garrison at Enda Selassie.

The offensive included maintaining the existing severe restrictions on movement and trade in eastern Tigray and northern Wollo and Gonder. The government also decided to cut off any access to food that the TPLF and its sympathizers might have through feeding programs. Therefore, rations at the camp at Ibnat (Gonder) were cut in March, and the camp itself was brutally closed on April 29. Over 50,000 destitute people were violently forced out by the army, which burned the makeshift houses, forced patients out of hospital beds, and left the expelled with no food, water or shelter. The incident created a diplomatic scandal, with the US charge d'affaires in particular speaking out in strong terms.

In southern Tigray and north Wollo, the army was moving through the heart of the famine zone. Its military progress was made easier by the depopulation of much of the area: there were few villagers to feed, house and provide intelligence for the TPLF fighters. Pushing west from Korem in mid-April, an army column captured Seqota, which had been held by the TPLF-EPDM since February 1982. This column then joined with the force in Abi Adi to cut off Simien, for another military assault from the western side (this attack was another reason for the burning of Ibnat). Simien is a major area of surplus grain and employment opportunities, and the military activities severely disrupted labor migration and the grain trade. In August, another offensive was launched on Simien, the fifth in 18 months.

One of the aims of the Eighth Offensive was to abort USAID plans to donate substantial amounts of relief to REST, by showing that REST could not safely deliver the food to Tigray. In this, as in its other short-term objectives, the offensive succeeded. In early March, USAID abandoned its ambitious plans for cross-border relief, and instead opted for utilizing private US humanitarian agencies working alongside the RRC – the Food for the North Initiative. The private agency World Vision was to open three feeding centers in government-held towns in Tigray. The government was initially uncooperative, but by April belatedly agreed to let World Vision open one feeding center, in Maichew.

Starving Tigray, 1985

In Eritrea, the Food for the North Initiative enabled the government to undertake a pacification program, using relief as part of its military strategy. In Tigray, the strategy was different. For the most part, the

government showed no interest in pacification -- the program for population relocation was the resettlement program, which removed people from the province altogether. Instead, it was interested in maintaining strategic garrisons and withholding food from the population which it correctly saw as sympathetic to the TPLF.

The relief agencies in Tigray had an important military role. This was not to pacify the countryside, but to protect military garrisons -- especially those most vulnerable to TPLF attack -- and their overland supply routes.

Thus in April, when the army captured Sheraro the government asked World Vision to come and set up a feeding center there. The TPLF recaptured the town before World Vision could respond to the request. Similarly, when Seqota was captured the same month, the government proposed moving some of the people in the camp at Korem to Seqota and inviting in foreign relief agencies. The agencies objected to the population relocation but agreed to start programs in Seqota.

The presence of the agencies did not stop the government withholding food from Tigray. This can be seen by comparing the relief deliveries to the various RRC centers in Ethiopia with the number of famine-affected people in the area served by each center, as shown in table 1.

Table 1. Deliveries by the RRC, April-August 1985

	% of affected people		% of grain delivered
Wollo	29	(25)	24.4
Nazareth	27	(23)	36.5
Eritrea	14	(12)	21.5
Tigray	21	(33)	5.6
Elsewhere	9	(8)	11.9

The figures err on the side of caution. First, they refer to the period between April and August 1985, when the government had greatest access to the different parts of Tigray, and before the disruption to supplies caused by the August offensive in Eritrea fed through to the distribution centers. Second, many of those in central and southern Ethiopia were in much less need than those in Tigray and north Wollo. Third, RRC figures for "affected people" are used. The RRC assumed that the total population of Tigray was 2.41 million, with 1.33 million "affected"; the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO) produced a slightly higher figure

of 1.58 million "affected." REST argued that the population was almost five million, with 3.8 million in need.

Mr Kurt Jansson, head of the UN Emergency Office for Ethiopia (UNEOE), endorsed the government-FAO figures saying that "the scientific evidence is indisputable."² At best, Mr Jansson was misinformed. As shown in chapter one, the scientific evidence about the population in Tigray is highly disputable, and the REST figure is almost certainly closer to the truth. The RRC figure for those in "need" was a work of imagination. The FAO crop assessment was based upon satellite imagery only; no ground visits to rural Tigray were undertaken. While the satellite imagery may have given a reliable indication of the geographical extent of the *drought*, the *famine* of course affected a much wider area. The FAO's inference to numbers of people affected was based upon the government's population figures.

It can safely be assumed that the RRC omitted a minimum of one million needy people in Tigray from its figures. This makes the neglect of Tigray is even more striking -- these revised figures are shown in brackets in table 1.

The figures show only RRC consignments; during this period distributions by voluntary agencies accounted for over half the relief. This was delivered in approximately the same proportions, thus not affecting the percentages in the table above.³

For reasons discussed in the preceding chapter, the cross-border relief effort was also starved of resources at this time. REST and ICRC transported 32,000 and 8,400 metric tonnes (MT) respectively into Tigray during all of 1985.

Thus Tigray, with one third of the total famine-stricken population, received only about one twentieth of the food relief. Needy Eritreans, per head, received about ten times as much.

In addition, official antipathy to large-scale aid to Wollo was evident to many relief workers, who reported on "a systematic attempt to deprive [Wollo] of food."⁴ Mr Kurt Jansson of UNEOE replied to the allegation that Wollo was being deprived, arguing that a low level of donations to

² Kurt Jansson, letter to Ms Gayle Smith, REST Support Committee, Washington DC, August 29, 1985.

³ With the exception of Eritrea, which received a smaller proportion from private agencies.

⁴ Paul Vallely, "Starving Wollo: An Empty Excuse," *The Times*, London, August 14, 1985.

the RRC and a relative shortage of voluntary agencies in the province accounted for the relief shortfall.⁵ He failed to explain why the RRC did not allow more voluntary agencies to work there, and did not increase its own consignments to Wollo, taking food away from other provinces with lesser need but larger programs.

In January 1985, the RRC was reaching 885,000 people in Wollo, and the voluntary agencies about 400,000. Over the course of the year, the voluntary agencies increased their programs so that by December they were reaching just over one million people. However, the people of Wollo gained little -- the RRC took the opportunity to reduce its programs, so that it was reaching only 153,000 by the year end -- making a gross total *lower* than that reached twelve months earlier. The expanding voluntary agency program was no excuse for the RRC cutbacks, as the distributions never reached as many as half of the estimated 2.58 million people in Wollo "in need."⁶

Sometimes the diversions were very crude. For instance, 7,500 MT of grain earmarked by the donors for Wollo and consigned to the RRC was sent "by mistake" to Nazareth in October 1985. It took four months of lobbying from the western aid donors before it reached its correct destination.⁷ Comparing Wollo unfavorably with other parts of the country, one investigator noted that rations there "rarely exceeded 10 kilograms [per person per month]."⁸

Yet, as the table shows, famine victims in Wollo received on average six times as much as those in Tigray. The UN claimed in August 1985 that 75 per cent of the (government-defined) needy people in Tigray were being reached, a total of 1,126,468 people, with rations of between five

⁵ Kurt Jansson, Michael Harris and Angela Penrose, *The Ethiopian Famine*, London, 1987, pp. 70-3.

⁶ Mitchell, 1986, pp. 26-7. If the earlier "in need" total of 1.79 million had been used, the performance would have been worse, not better. Many of the 1.79 million were extremely needy people in the war-affected northern parts of Wollo, who were not reached by the distributions. Most of the 790,000 people later added to the figure were less needy but more accessible, and received rations. Similar "needy" populations were "discovered" in government-held areas in 1985 and afterwards as large quantities of western relief became available.

⁷ Mitchell, 1986.

⁸ Peter Cutler, "The Development of the 1983-85 Famine in Northern Ethiopia," PhD thesis, London, 1988, p. 414.

and 15 kilograms per month.⁹ This was blatantly untrue. The RRC distributed a mere 569 MT that month, and World Vision (the principal agency in the Food for the North program) was well short of its target figure of 180,000 recipients.

The UN claim was based on a four-day visit to army garrisons in Tigray made in the company of senior government officials in July, which was the month in which the largest government distributions to date had occurred, by far. Allocations to Tigray and Eritrea then dropped by 85% in August, while those to southern and central provinces rose by 76%. Even the briefly-expanded distributions of July, however, reached far fewer people than the UN claimed -- that would have required a program equalling that in Wollo. Most of the recipients were the 116,000 Tigrayans in and around relief shelters in the government-held towns of the province, resettlers, and the militia. In the spring and summer of 1985, it is unlikely that as much as fifteen per cent of the needy in Tigray received relief from the government side.

Controlling Tigray 1985-7: I The Army

Following the Eighth Offensive, the Ethiopian army had a greater degree of control in Tigray than at any time since 1977. The counter-insurgency strategy already developed continued to be implemented with great ruthlessness. This included military patrols, the activities of army irregulars, repeated attempts to block REST's relief operation, the bombing of markets, forced resettlement, and the supply of only small amounts of food to the general population.

Significant army attacks concentrated on attempts to control the roads from Sudan, such as assaults made in April and July 1986.

Most of the military activity consisted of army patrols, which harassed, detained and executed peasants. Some soldiers captured by the TPLF told visitors of their actions.¹⁰

Mohamed, a former goldsmith ... admitted that his patrol had looted a farm at Mai Kenetel [central Tigray] and then set fire to the building. When the inhabitants tried to flee they were mown down by soldiers who are trained to do the actual killing. Another wounded soldier, Thomas, had experience of these killers. He said: "We were ordered

⁹ Jansson, Harris and Penrose, 1987, p. 51.

¹⁰ Gerry McCann, "Between Heaven and Hell", *Observer Scotland*, April 16, 1989.

to see everyone as the enemy. I killed through my eyes [i.e. I was ready to kill] many times. Two peasants once strayed into my patrol -- they tried to run but were caught. The CO [commanding officer] interrogated them and then made us tie their hands. Another soldier shot them both between the eyes.

Many minor atrocities in Tigray were committed by government-recruited *banda*, which translates as mercenaries, saboteurs, and terrorists. A visitor to Tigray made the following notes after interviewing a peasant farmer in Medebai sub-district (near Axum):

There were security problems in his Tabia [cluster of villages], he said, which borders Eritrea. Government recruited armed personnel from the locality who, since they are knowledgeable of the surroundings, guide government soldiers who are occasionally sent across the Mereb River from Eritrea, especially to a district called Qohaine to disrupt life. They are paid in food grain by the government. People refer to them as "bandas." In September 1987 they killed some peasants.

We were informed that on 31 October 1987, the day of our arrival at the Chilla Wereda [sub-district], they murdered a young peasant at his home near the main town of Axum and peeled his skin off. It was further explained that similar atrocities were perpetrated by the bandas from time to time in "semi-liberated" areas, i.e. areas adjacent to government garrison towns.

One of the most common activities undertaken by *banda* was the planting of land mines on routes from Sudan used by TPLF and REST.

In March 1988, the government launched its Ninth Offensive in Tigray, with the intention of recapturing the garrisons that had been taken over the previous five months by the TPLF. In moving out of the garrisons, the army was militarily exposed and the TPLF was able to launch a counter-offensive and inflict a series of defeats. After the battle of Afabet, the defeats quickly turned into a rout, and in late March and early April, the TPLF captured most of the towns in Tigray.

Controlling Tigray II: The Air Force

The main targets of continued aerial bombing were markets, REST convoys, and anything else that the pilots happened to notice. Three trucks belonging to the ICRC were destroyed by bombing on February 3, 1986, and one driver was killed. Adi Nebried market was bombed and strafed

in February 1987; 17 were killed and 55 wounded.¹¹ Sheraro market was bombed in December 1987, killing ten. Phosphorous was often used, for instance as described by Tabey Kidane, aged 19: "I was guarding my cattle near Edaga Habreit, when burning material came from the sky, burning the trees and the grass and killing one of my cows." When examined ten months later by Dr Eric Charles, his wounds were still suppurating: "the burns were deep and were a chemical type of burn ... they kept erupting and wouldn't heal."

The Ninth Offensive in March 1988 was brief, but witnessed a number of atrocities by the air force. These included:

- * Abi Adi: "Within a few days of [the army's] departure, two helicopters came and bombed the market square, killing and wounding 48 people. Many of the people who died on that occasion were women, and it was terrible to see their bodies lying in the square."¹²
- * March 23: Nebelet village bombed, at least one old woman killed. This was the 11th occasion that this village had been bombed, killing 17 people in total.

Controlling Tigray III: Relief Agencies

The amounts of relief given on the government side in Tigray were small, and often given largely as an inducement for resettlement. RRC relief was distributed exclusively in the towns, and the continued existence of the garrison towns came to depend on regular supplies from the RRC.

The main function of the aid agencies' operations in Tigray, as far as the government was concerned, was to protect vulnerable garrisons from attack by the TPLF -- the front would lose more in adverse international publicity by attacking a garrison with a foreign relief agency present than it could hope to gain militarily. In mid-1985 it began to allow more international relief operations in and around Tigray, notably in Axum, Adigrat, Abi Adi, Seqota and -- abortively -- Sheraro.

In December 1986, a TPLF-EPDM force (re)captured Seqota, closing an ICRC feeding program, and causing an outcry among relief workers and diplomats. In March 1988, an EPDM unit destroyed three relief trucks with their grain, in eastern Gonder, causing another round of condemnations.

¹¹ *Sunday Times*, London, March 4, 1987.

¹² Interview with Woreda Teka of Abi Adi Baito conducted by Sarah Vaughan and Gerry McCann.

Because the trucks were painted green and unmarked, the EPDM claimed that the fighters believed them to be army vehicles. (Four white UN trucks accompanying them were allowed to proceed.) In the same month the TPLF (re)captured Abi Adi. A western diplomat was outraged: "essentially what this means is that there is going to be mass starvation almost immediately," and the director of USAID added: "It's going to hurt us hard."¹³ Two days later, Abi Adi was bombed by the air force.

The most striking instance of the government's complete disregard for the welfare of the hungry people of Tigray, and its sole concern with military objectives, comes from Wukro, which was captured by the TPLF shortly after taking Abi Adi. The TPLF's attack drew condemnation from diplomats and relief personnel. Under an ad hoc agreement, the TPLF allowed the ICRC staff who remained in Wukro to distribute the remaining food. An international food monitor described what happened next:

On April 8, 25-30,000 people gathered in Wukro in order to collect food aid ... The ICRC distribution site, with a huge, clearly marked red cross tent, is just on the edge of the town. The ICRC representative of Adigrat, who had taken over responsibility for Wukro after it was controlled by TPLF, arrived in the late morning ... with his mobile radio he sent an open message to the ICRC headquarters in Addis Ababa,¹⁴ giving details on the upcoming distribution ... At 2 p.m., MiGs appeared and started bombing, very close to the orphan-center. The building caught fire immediately, and the roof collapsed ... in this building, 52 dead bodies were counted, which were buried in two bomb craters. While people from the distribution site and orphan center were fleeing, the MiGs returned and bombed with cluster shells. In only one street, I counted five big bomb craters.¹⁵

A total of about 100 people were killed in this bombing raid, and 14,000 people fled the town. Wukro was bombed again on April 13, and 31 people were killed.

In northern Wollo, relief was more generous than in Tigray. However it was closely tied to the implementation of government policies, such as resettlement, road-building, and the control of movement. On many

¹³ *International Herald Tribune*, March 10, 1988.

¹⁴ This was despite strong objections by the local TPLF commander.

¹⁵ Maria Altstidl, "Report on a Visit to Tigray," German Emergency Doctors, April 1988.

occasions, rural people would gather for a distribution, only to find that they did not meet the criteria for receiving relief — for what reasons, they did not know. A poem about restrictions on relief has been recorded:

What kind of grain was it which deceived us?
What kind of wheat was it which deceived us?
It returned to its country, and sent us to the forest.¹⁶

During this period, the government also continued to oppose the cross-border operation from Sudan. Relief vehicles were bombed, and agencies involved in the program were subject to hostile propaganda. Unfortunately, the UN continued to decline to recognize the cross-border program, even though in 1988 it transported over 150,000 MT of relief supplies.

Government hostility did not even spare the ICRC, which was forced to take unusual measures and operate clandestinely, with unmarked vehicles travelling at night. Following the summer drought of 1987, the ICRC began to promote a proposal for safe passage, whereby relief could be transported across the battle lines from government-held towns to rebel-held villages. This "Open Roads for Survival" initiative was launched on November 12, 1987. Unfortunately, the ICRC was either over-optimistic about the prospects for success of the initiative, or it believed that sufficient political pressure from the donors to make the proposal work would only be forthcoming if the cross-border operation were seen to be unable to reach the needy in central Tigray. The result was that the ICRC withdrew from the cross-border operation, and declined to donate its fleet of 81 trucks in Sudan to other agencies working cross-border. It also publicly disputed the claim made by REST and the Emergency Relief Desk¹⁷ that cross-border supplies could reach the highlands on a road newly-constructed by the TPLF.

The EPLF and TPLF both agreed to the "open roads" proposal, though they publicly accused the ICRC of being politically partisan to the government. However, the government failed to agree to the ICRC's "open roads" plan — and indeed on April 6, 1988, it expelled the ICRC from Eritrea and Tigray. The head of the RRC, Berhanu Jambere, justified this, saying that the problem was "terrorist action supported by external forces, and not an all-out external war. Therefore the organization's neutral status

¹⁶ Quoted in: Alula Pankhurst, "Settling for a New World: People and the State in an Ethiopian Resettlement Village," PhD thesis, Manchester, 1990, p. 121.

¹⁷ A consortium of voluntary agencies consigning food to ERA and REST.

does not apply here."¹⁸ Another broadcast shed further light on this decision: Addis Ababa radio accused the ICRC of having an "arrogant and anti-people stand" and "directly and indirectly supporting the bandits."¹⁹ Two days later, the air force bombed an ICRC distribution at Wukro (see above). Instead of its announced plan to feed one million people in Tigray by April, ICRC was feeding none.

A final ironic aspect of the relationship between suffering in Tigray and the central government is the role that the drought of 1987 played in the government's strategy. The drought affected Tigray and its borderlands; central Wollo and other government-controlled areas were scarcely affected. On the basis of the drought in Tigray and the accompanying international publicity, the government appealed for 1.3 million MT of relief grain. This was almost three times the request made in March 1984, when the situation was immeasurably more serious -- but this time the western donors accused the RRC of underestimating the size of the problem. By this time, famine in Ethiopia was such a sensitive issue in the domestic politics of western countries that the response was immediate and generous. Within seven months, the target had been met -- a rate of donation 14 times as high as in the seven months after the March 1984 appeal. The total amount donated was well in excess of what the RRC estimated was needed, and even more in excess of real needs. Most of the grain, of course, never went to Tigray, but in effect served as an enormous subsidy for the programs of titanic social engineering that the government was implementing in the southern and central parts of the country.

Insurgency Strategy of the TPLF

Following the famine and the 1985 offensives, both EPLF and TPLF were in temporary military disarray. But by mid-1988 they were enjoying great military success, and had begun their march to victory. The fundamental reason for this is that the government strategy of using famine as an element of war so deeply alienated the peasantry that they turned in increasing numbers to the rebel fronts.

Introducing his authoritative discussion of peasant survival during the famine in Wollo, Dr Dessalegn Rahmato of Addis Ababa University writes:

¹⁸ Quoted in: BBC, *Summary of World Broadcasts (SWB)*, ME 0124, April 13, 1988.

¹⁹ Radio Addis Ababa, April 13, 1988, quoted in; BBC, *SWB*, ME 0126, April 15, 1988. This accusation was made ironically on the basis of the ICRC's former cross-border relief operation into rebel-held areas.

"for obvious reasons, I shall leave out of our account resistance and rebellion as a form of survival strategy."²⁰ However, armed resistance was an essential element to survival strategies.

Between 1984 and 1987, the number of TPLF fighters rose nearly three-fold, and the front was turning away volunteers. When engaged in military action, the TPLF could count on active support from the local population.

Even when attacking relief distribution centers, the rebels had local support. Local peasants argued that the damage done by having an army garrison in the vicinity frightening people and disrupting movement outweighed any benefit from the food provided. "The food of the Dergue is a poison" remarked one woman farmer.²¹

The TPLF military strategy was dramatically changed by the famine and the evacuation to Sudan. Over the years 1985-7, it concentrated on consolidating a "base area" in western Tigray, and controlling the access routes from Sudan. In this respect, its strategy was more like that of the EPLF.

Outside the base area, the main TPLF strategy was to attack isolated garrisons at unpredictable times. As these garrisons were the key to the government-sponsored relief effort in Tigray and its borderlands, the supply of relief suffered too. In 1983, the TPLF had captured relief workers at Jarre and Korem; in November 1984, it attacked Korem again. In 1985, it staged raids on the Korem-Seqota road, though a relief monitor noted "casualties from TPLF land mines or TPLF attacks were infrequent and greater damage was caused by reckless driving."²² On March 8, 1986, the TPLF and EPDM attacked Alamata (north Wollo), and two World Vision employees were killed and four wounded. According to witnesses, the killings were not the "mistake" claimed by the TPLF, but were deliberate.²³ The following month, the TPLF destroyed two bridges over the Tekezze river, disrupting transport in western Tigray. In December 1986, the TPLF-EPDM (re)captured Seqota, closing an ICRC feeding program.

In late 1987, the TPLF began to go on the offensive, snuffing out the army's network of small garrisons. On October 2, it captured the strategic

²⁰ Dessalegn Rahmato, "Famine Survival Strategies: A Case Study of Northeast Ethiopia," Addis Ababa, Institute of Development Research, 1987, p. 7.

²¹ Interviewed in Abi Adi by Alex de Waal, November 1988.

²² Mitchell, 1986, p. 38.

²³ *International Herald Tribune*, May 13, 1986.

garrison of Rama, on the border with Eritrea, and a number of smaller army outposts followed. On February 22, 1988, it captured three relief workers, who were later released. In March it captured Abi Adi. The government launched a counter-offensive, which ended in military disaster.

12. RESETTLEMENT

Three weeks after the media attention to the famine in October 1984, the Ethiopian government officially launched what was to be the most controversial aspect of its whole famine policy: resettlement. The plan was to move a large section of the population from the north to the south. The target was 1.5 million people. In fact, about 600,000 people were moved in three phases: November 1984–May 1985, October 1985–January 1986, and November 1987–March 1988. The justification presented to the west and to the people of Ethiopia was that it was a famine relief measure -- the north of the country was stricken by drought and environmental collapse, and the only alternative was to move most of the people elsewhere. Official justifications were embellished with such manifest untruths as: "the fact is that much of Ethiopia, particularly the northern provinces of Tigray and Wello, are today an uninhabitable wasteland" and "there have scarcely been any real rains in the drought-prone areas since the 1972–4 catastrophe."¹ In the domestic Ethiopian media, the resettlement program was presented as *the* relief program -- the two were synonymous.

As well as drought relief, the program was described in glowing terms as an opportunity to use the "virgin lands" of the south and west, as an opportunity for socialist transformation and mechanization of agriculture in the resettlement sites, and as the first challenge to the cadres of the newly-set up Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WPE).

The TPLF and independent observers were quick to infer another motive: counter-insurgency. Population relocation had been a central part of counter-insurgency strategy in the southeast and in Eritrea, but had not yet been tried in Tigray and north Wollo. A policy of trying to remove by force a large section of the population was consonant with both long-standing military strategy in the country and the existing policy of "draining the sea to catch the fish." A Tigrayan resettler, Hailu Kelela, was told by his guards "Your whole woreda [sub-district] supports the TPLF, so we will break anyone who lives here and we will not stop with the people, but we will destroy the whole land unto the last tree."² In addition, the

¹ RRC, *The Challenges of Drought: Ethiopia's Decade of Struggle in Relief and Rehabilitation*, Addis Ababa, 1985, pp. 180 and 231.

² Quoted by Peter Niggli, "Ethiopia: Deportations and Forced Labour Camps," Berlin, Berliner Missionwerk, 1986, p. 9.

settler population provided a government stronghold in the resettlement regions in the southwest, where the OLF insurgency was gaining ground.

Many Ethiopian government policies, including villagization and the control of trade and migration, functioned both as counter-insurgency strategies and as mechanisms for social and economic control of the peasantry. Resettlement was the same. The details of the implementation of the program varied from place to place; at its worst, it was a brutal form of counter-insurgency, at its best, a fierce attack on the independence of the peasantry.

Background to Resettlement

Before the revolution there was a steady spontaneous outmigration from the northern highlands to the south and west. Adrian Wood, an authority on migration in Ethiopia identified 17 locations where resettlement was occurring between 1950 and 1974, partly encouraged by the government, and partly assisted by measures such as the eradication of malaria from many lowland areas.³ Up to one million people are estimated to have moved. International agencies such as the World Bank agreed that the northern highlands were "overpopulated" and encouraged the government to start programs for controlled resettlement.

The land reform of 1975 and accompanying policy changes stemmed much of the movement, by making migration and the acquisition of land more difficult. Rather than granting people freedom of movement, the government sought to control the process of resettlement. In the ten years between 1974 and 1984, 187,000 people were resettled under the auspices of the Settlement Authority and RRC. They included the urban unemployed, pastoralists and returning refugees as well as northern peasants. The process was not a success. Although the settlements were planned to achieve self-reliance within three years, by 1984 there were still 70,000 resettlers needing food assistance.⁴ The program was also very expensive. Consequently, in 1983 the RRC stopped resettlement and started an internal review of what had gone wrong. The review concluded in September 1984

³ Adrian Wood, "Spontaneous Agricultural Resettlement in Ethiopia, 1950-74," in J. I. Clarke and L. A. Kosinski (eds.) *Redistribution of Population in Africa*, London, 1982.

⁴ Alula Pankhurst, "Settling for a New World: People and the State in an Ethiopian Resettlement Village," PhD Thesis, Manchester, 1990, pp. 39-40.

with the recommendation that a small-scale and slowed-down approach be tried, using oxen and not tractors for cultivation.⁵

In the event, two months later, the exact opposite approach to resettlement was implemented.

Recruitment of settlers: Non-Insurgent Areas

The Ethiopian government insisted to the western world that the resettlement program was voluntary. This was a lie. In fact, each district in the north had its own quota of resettlers, which it had to fill. If volunteers could be had, that was good; if not, other means would be found to recruit settlers. The existence of the quota system was itself fundamentally incompatible with the notion that the recruitment was voluntary.

In non-insurgent areas, various means were used to recruit settlers. At the beginning, some famine victims were so desperate that they volunteered. Resettlement camps and villages which had filled their quotas for resettlement were given priority in terms of aid from the RRC, and there were many instances of the withholding of aid in order to encourage resettlement from certain areas. Yimam, a settler explained:

It was a short term problem; how to "cross over" from March to April. We could not last out till the main rains crop. If we could somehow have survived through that period, we wouldn't have resettled.⁶

The food available in the resettlement transit camps enticed many. One settler reported: "If we could have slipped out after eating our fill we would have done so" and another likened the camp to a rat trap set to ensnare people.⁷ All transit camps were heavily guarded to prevent people from escaping.

Propaganda was also used to obtain volunteers, describing the easy and comfortable life that settlers could expect in their new homes. For example, a video film of green pastures and forests was shown to the inmates of Korem feeding shelter on December 31, 1984. A similar film later shown on Ethiopian television had shot the Wollo landscape through a filter that

⁵ Pankhurst, 1990, p. 40.

⁶ Pankurst, 1990, pp. 95-6. March is the hungry month before April when the harvest from the short rains is gathered in.

⁷ Pankurst, 1990, p. 124.

made it appear red and barren, while the colors of the southern landscape were distorted so as to appear blue-green.

However, an analysis of the origins of settlers clearly shows that accessibility for government cadres and soldiers was the overriding factor in determining whether people were resettled. 56 per cent of the resettlers in Wollo in 1984/5 came from the easily-reached districts of Dessie Zuria and Kalu, despite the short-term nature of the drought there. By contrast Wag and Lasta, much worse-affected by famine but also more remote, provided only 13 per cent.⁸ At an individual level, coercion was used. Those in dispute with their Peasant Association (PA) chairman, or in arrears on PA dues or tax payments, were likely to be detained and resettled. Some traders were stopped at checkpoints and resettled, others were picked off the streets. A woman from near Kombolcha reported how she and eleven other families were taken: "We were called to a meeting and told 'your land is on the mountain slope which is to be used for the forestry; you have to go for resettlement!' We didn't even eat the maize we had grown on our irrigated land."⁹

An agriculturalist studying conditions in Wollo delicately captured the official approach:

Perhaps the fine line between voluntary and coerced resettlement is captured by the notion of "bego teseno", to which party officials and political cadres carefully and skillfully reverted when voluntariness failed. "Bego" means goodness or kindness, and "teseno" means coercion. Hence, "bego teseno" literally means coercion for someone's own good. That is to say, for those who do not know their own interest, coercion is a legitimate means of helping them realize it.¹⁰

The government guidelines for selecting settlers clearly state that a willingness to go is only one of the criteria to be used. The other criteria include being a member of the "urban unemployed," living in an area designated for conservation or development, being in arrears on tax payments, living in a densely-populated area, being destitute and having

⁸ John Mitchell, "Review of the Famine Relief Operation in Wollo Administrative Region," 1986, mimeo, p. 53.

⁹ Pankurst, 1990, p. 164.

¹⁰ Alemneh Dejene, *Environment, Famine and Politics in Ethiopia: A View from the Village*, Boulder, Co., 1990, p. 99.

eaten reserves of seed, and being a pastoralist. A government survey found that 38% of settlers belonged to these "non-voluntary" categories.¹¹

Recruitment of Settlers: Insurgent Areas

In Tigray and northern Wollo, the means of recruiting settlers was much more straightforward: force was used.

Reliable reports of resettlement at gunpoint were available from early 1985. In the first week of February, 17 truck-loads of settlers were forced from Meqele camp, and taken to the airport. On February 10, over 200 men were separated from their families and taken from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) feeding center of Wahreb Sharti near Meqele,¹² in the same week Afar herdsmen were rounded up by soldiers in Adigrat.¹³ On March 10, over 100 were taken at gunpoint at Korem.

The issue came to a head at the end of 1985. In October, a UN food monitor was travelling together with two nurses from the French relief agency Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) to Kelala in north Wollo. They encountered a group of about 100 people being escorted to a resettlement transit camp by two soldiers, who freely admitted that they were under instructions to shoot any who ran away. A few weeks later, the food monitor reported to the UN Emergency Office for Ethiopia (UNEOE) in Addis Ababa on this and four other similar incidents. The head of UNEOE forwarded the report to President Mengistu, and an official "investigation" was mounted, which consisted of a guided tour of transit camps in the environs of Dessie, the regional capital of Wollo. The guides were provided by the RRC, and at least one Amharic-speaking foreign member of the team was intimidated by his guide, being threatened with expulsion from the country if he conducted his own investigations or publicized his findings. Not surprisingly, the investigative mission reported that nothing was amiss.

MSF, however, were less content, and in December went public with an account of the forcible resettlement of 600 people in Korem on one of three such occasions in October and November. The agency also claimed that the program was causing the deaths of 100,000 people. MSF were immediately expelled, and no more dissenting voices were heard among

¹¹ Pankurst, 1990, p. 161.

¹² *The Guardian*, London, February 11, 1985.

¹³ *The Times*, London, February 9, 1985.

the relief agencies in Ethiopia. Shortly after MSF made their allegations, an Oxfam nurse, Carol Ashwood, confirmed that food had been withheld from famine victims with the aim of forcing them to resettle.¹⁴ The Oxfam press officer responded to the implicit slur on the organization:

We continue to make representations to the Ethiopian authorities if we have evidence that the scale or speed of resettlement or the methods employed involve coercion or are disruptive of harvesting or feeding programmes. Based on our experiences last year, we have so far found this approach more effective than high-profile public denunciations.¹⁵

In late 1985, trucks belonging to the Save the Children Fund (SCF-UK) were forcibly commandeered to transport resettlers. SCF protested privately to the RRC, but made no public statement, even when the trucks were taken on a second occasion. Both agencies were anxious not to endanger their ongoing relief programs.

At the end of 1985 the US-based human rights group Cultural Survival released a report on the resettlement program, based on interviews with refugees in Sudan who had escaped from the resettlement camps.¹⁶ This report, based on 250 interviews with refugees who had escaped the resettlement camps, repeated the allegations and provided many additional details of human rights violations.

The US government was outspokenly critical of the resettlement program, and repeatedly criticized it for being forcible — notably in a Presidential Determination of September 1985. No US assistance was ever given to the program. Apologists for the government accused the refusal of the US and UK governments to support the program of being "a spiteful and misdirected error."¹⁷

However, the UN consistently played down the controversy. Over the previous eight months the head of UNEOE, Mr Kurt Jansson, had repeatedly asked the government for explanations of reports of forcible resettlement.

¹⁴ "Oxfam Nurse says Ethiopia 'Blackmails' Refugees," *African Business*, January 1986.

¹⁵ "Oxfam Outlines its Approach in Ethiopia," *African Business*, February 1986.

¹⁶ Cultural Survival, *Politics and the Ethiopian Famine 1984-1985*, Cambridge, Mass., December 1985.

¹⁷ Graham Hancock, *Ethiopia: The Challenge of Hunger*, London, 1985, p. 110. Mr Hancock has since revised his position.

He later reported that "I never received a satisfactory explanation,"¹⁸ but neither did he publicly speak of any doubts he may have had. This silent endorsement edged towards an open advocacy when the controversy re-emerged. Mr Jansson related the problem specifically to the single incident of 600 people being forced onto trucks at Korem. Speaking to journalists, he "stressed that it was not certain that all 600 were moved against their will," and on the basis of this and other similar arguments urged relief agencies to support the resettlement program to avert widespread suffering.¹⁹

In January 1986, the program was suspended for nearly two years, though it is widely agreed that the main reasons for this were the huge expense and low returns, not international pressure. When resettlement was restarted, similar instances of coercion recurred almost at once. On January 3, 1988, seven people were killed while "resisting" resettlement at Korem -- by trying to run away. On February 8, 20 were shot dead, while 3,000 were forcibly resettled. The information reached the BBC, based on eyewitness accounts provided by medical and nutritional staff belonging to foreign voluntary agencies. The government instructed the agencies to deny the existence of the incident, and a representative of SCF was clearly discomfited when questioned about it by the British House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee:

I think we will never know. I think it would be hard to find out what really happened in Korem. ... The Ethiopian government has officially denied that the resettlement is forcible. I think their official explanation, concerning the claims made by the BBC about Korem, is to refer to it as a problem of disinformation brought about by foreign agencies acting in concert with the BBC. It obviously puts us into a very difficult position ...²⁰

In fact, there is a considerable amount of independent evidence that corroborates the account originally given by the relief workers in Korem. This incident will be examined in some detail because the evidence has

¹⁸ Kurt Jansson, Michael Harris and Angela Penrose, *The Ethiopian Famine*, London, 1987, p. 67.

¹⁹ *The Guardian*, London, November 7, 1985.

²⁰ Minutes of Evidence taken before Foreign Affairs Committee, February 17, 1988.

not been published before, and because it illustrates that nearly three years after the initial accounts of forced resettlement, pressure brought to bear on the government through "private representations" had absolutely no effect.

The personal diary of Eyob Goitam Naizghi, a visitor to Seqota in June 1988, gives an independent account of the background to those events:

By the "tella house" (local bar), one man is attempting to explain his experience of family separation with indignation and regret. It was some time in December of 1987, when people in his village started a rumour about food distribution in Korem by the "Commission". After a few days of deep thinking, he said, a group of them decided to pack and walk it to Korem with their families. After two days, approaching Korem, they decided to leave their families behind, and the men went to Korem to investigate if what they heard was real or a trap. After having met the authorities of the "Commission", they were told to register with their families and were given food-grain that will last them for about two days. Thinking of it all, they were not able to sense any trap for resettlement. Thus, they decided to bring their families inside Korem.

After two days, someone was moving quietly and telling people to sell their pack animals. They cannot tell who he belongs to, and they thought it was all a mad joke. Two days later, early morning, they were rounded up by the army and loaded into brand new "Red Cross"²¹ donated trucks, on their way to the unknown places. It was only then they recognized it was a trap. Down-playing whatever guilt feelings he may have felt deep inside, he told us, the uninvited audience, boastfully how he sneaked out of the truck and managed to escape to his village, leaving his wife with three children and a donkey behind. What a loss, he says to the donkey, because that was the only tangible property he ever owned. As to his family, he only hopes that they are doing fine, for he has heard nothing since they separated.

In the middle of all this sadness, two Russian-made MiG fighter planes unexpectedly roar the skies of Sekota town. Every single of us in the town are in panic. Even those with shaky legs are attempting to run away to the unknown ...

²¹ Rural Ethiopians commonly call any non-governmental relief agency the "Red Cross."

In January 1989, a visitor to TPLF-controlled Tigray interviewed several groups of escapees from the resettlement site of Pawe in Gojjam who were returning home. These are some extracts from the testimonies:

1. We are returning to our homes in Wollo at a place called Sekota. We escaped in the moonlight. We were taken last year during February – about 11 months ago. There was an announcement from the government that everyone from Sekota should come to get cards to receive food rations. ... When we arrived there we were encircled by armed forces who beat and killed. Everyone, big and small, with or without families, were being forced into the truck. Those who refused were immediately shot. A lot of people died.
2. The government informed us that, because of the drought, they wanted us to come to a center to receive food rations and supplies. As we gathered at the place to receive the rations, we were surrounded by soldiers on all sides. The military forced us to be loaded on a truck which took us to the resettlement sites. Those who tried to claim property or family members left behind were beaten and shot dead. We were loaded on to 40 trucks altogether the first day, 30 trucks the second, and 60 trucks the third day. ... We were taken last year [1988] in February. After this month it will be one year ago.
3. When they took us from Korem, a lot of people died, shot dead. Five people were shot dead beside me by Kalashnikovs from the armed forces who forced us to be loaded onto the truck. Some lost their legs. There were tremendous beatings. We were surrounded in Korem as we went to the marketplace. Most of us left our families and properties and wives at home. We even left the donkey we had brought to market for loading what we could purchase. Two people jumped off the truck and died immediately.
4. We come from Gojjam Metekel resettlement area. We were forced by the Dergue from Korem to go there last year. When we went to collect ration cards off the Red Cross we were forced into armed trucks by the military and sent to Metekel.... Many people were killed by gun shots when we were forced away. Ten people died by jumping off the truck. 30 more people were wounded. I personally saw 20 people die.

Six months later, another foreign visitor to Tigray met a group of 34 escapees from Village Settlement Area No. 102 of Metekel, Gojjam. Their original home was Andork near Seqota, and he recounted their story:

They were starving due to drought, and in January 1988 were called by the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission to go to the feeding centre at Korem where they would be fed. They were part of a group of 1200 people from their village area who went into Korem on 8th February '88, they were not issued with food but ordered instead to get into lorries for a journey to resettlement. They refused, and in consequence some 20 people were shot dead and some 30 wounded, after which they were herded into the lorries. In this process families were separated; in this group a man and wife are still with one son, but their two other sons have never been seen since they left Korem.

The policy of forcibly taking people for resettlement was not only a violation of their basic human rights, but also acted as a powerful deterrent to rural people visiting towns, thus disrupting trade, migration and the collection of relief.

Conditions in Transit and on Arrival

Despite the preferential targeting of relief food to transit camps, they remained places where many died, especially in Tigray. Figures for Ambassel in Wollo indicate that 140 per thousand of those selected for resettlement died in transit camps alone²² -- fortunately, a figure that is unlikely to be representative. The use of unpressurized airplanes to fly settlers south, at least during the first year, also led to many deaths.

Most of the resettlement sites were hastily chosen. The site of Metekel in Gojjam was picked by President Mengistu during a helicopter tour, and proved to be highly unsuitable.²³ Most sites were chosen within three weeks of the launch of the program, without the benefit of prior agronomic or hydrological surveys. The settlers were unused to local conditions and fell prey to unfamiliar diseases; they were also unfamiliar with the local farming conditions. Most of the "conventional" resettlement sites were run as cooperative farms, using mechanized plowing, and with settlers earning work points for their activities. Cadres of the WPE were able to implement their dreams of socialist collectivization. By 1988, many sites, instead of producing the expected surpluses to support the government,

²² Cultural Survival, *Ethiopia: More Light on Resettlement*, London, 1991, p. 6.

²³ This settlement project, perhaps the most disastrous in the country in terms of loss of human life, was generously supported by the Italian government aid program.

were still far from self-sufficient, and became recipients of famine relief. The government was forced to introduce major policy changes, such as a return to the use of oxen on individual smallholdings. In "integrated" settlements, local people were compelled to integrate the settlers into their existing villages, apportioning them land, and in these cases the settlers farmed as smallholders using traditional technology.

The appalling conditions endured by the settlers have been well-documented elsewhere, and will not be further detailed here.²⁴

The Counter-Insurgency Function of Resettlement Sites

The resettlement sites of Hareya and Melka Oda in Bale have already been mentioned as part of the counter-insurgency strategy adopted in that area (chapter 5). Resettlement sites in Wollega from 1979 onwards were also used in a similar way. In 1983, a development expert noted:

Settlement schemes and state farms as centres of government presence in areas may also have a role to play in controlling the rural population. These may be used as listening posts and military bases should the need arise. Where the settlers and farm workers are not locals, as is often the case, they may help break up the ethnic homogeneity of an area and provide a force loyal to the government. From this point of view, these projects can be seen as modern day *katamas* [*neftenya* garrisons] to watch over the local populations, while a military significance may be assigned to the roads built.²⁵

The concentration of resettlement sites in western Gojjam (where the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) was active) and western Wollega and Illubabor (where the OLF was active) is no coincidence. Not only were large "conventional" settlements established, but "integrated" settlements were also set up, in which the settler population was mixed in with the locals. The counter-insurgency components of this policy will be further examined in chapter 18.

²⁴ Survival International, *Ethiopia's Bitter Medicine: Settling for Disaster*, London, 1986; Survival International, 1991; Cultural Survival, *Politics and the Ethiopian Famine 1984-1985*, Cambridge, Mass., 1985, Peter Niggli, *Ethiopia: Deportations and Forced Labour Camps*, Berlin, 1986.

²⁵ Adrian Wood, "Rural Development and National Integration in Ethiopia," *African Affairs*, 82, (1983) p. 532.

Though counter-insurgency considerations were certainly important in the planning and implementation of the program, once the government had decided to proceed, the program generated a momentum of its own. It has already been shown how the need to fill quotas resulted in more resettlers being taken from the accessible areas of central and southern Wollo, and fewer from the insurgent areas of north Wollo and Tigray. Similarly, when resettlement sites were chosen, the initial selection was done extremely rapidly, and many of the sites decided upon turned out to be unsuitable for habitation. For the same reasons, the sites chosen -- at least during 1984/5 -- were probably less than ideal for counter-insurgency purposes. The implementation of the program -- later officially described as "hasty" -- also led to local support for the OLF and EPRP.

Escape

Large numbers of settlers escaped or tried to escape. Even official figures give estimates for population loss that range above 20%.²⁶ One estimate of the returnees to Wollo alone is 75,000;²⁷ settlers from Tigray were reported to have a much higher propensity to escape. Those who returned home often represented just a fraction of the attempted escapees: the dangers of the trip included punishment (including summary execution) by cadres, interception by the army, harassment and enslavement by members of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and other Sudanese militias, banditry, the attentions of wild animals, flooded rivers, and disease and hunger. In one reported incident in December 1984, 330 escaping settlers were burned to death when government soldiers set brush fires around their camp.²⁸

A significant abuse against escapees was enslavement by soldiers of SPLA. The SPLA, which has been fighting against the government of Sudan since 1983, enjoyed close links with the Mengistu government (see chapter 18).

SPLA soldiers frequently captured escapees, and subjected them to forced labor or concubinage. This amounts to enslavement. Most of the victims

²⁶ G. Sivini, "Famine and the Resettlement Program in Ethiopia," *Africa* (Roma), 41, (1986) p. 231.

²⁷ Alemneh Dejene, 1990, p. 98.

²⁸ Gayle Smith, "Report on New Refugee Arrivals to Blue Nile Province, Sudan, January 13-14, 1985," Damazin, Sudan.

were Tigrayan resettlers escaping from the resettlement sites and heading for the refugee camp at ed Damazin in Sudan.

In February 1986, Sandra Steingraber found 52 Tigrayan resettlers who had just arrived in ed Damazin, after being held by the SPLA. 30 were adult women.²⁹ Tigrayans in the camp knew of almost 1,000 others still held by the SPLA. The TPLF was unable to negotiate their release until over one year later, and there were a number of subsequent stories of small numbers of escapees being captured and held for varying lengths of time.

There was a remarkable absence of women among the southern Sudanese refugee population: it appears that the SPLA soldiers decided to obtain replacement women by force. One woman who spent two months in captivity recounted her ordeal:

In October [1985] my husband and I escaped from that place [Gambela resettlement camp] with a large group -- over 1,000 people -- and we fled into the forest.

When we reached Sudan, we met people who at first gave us food. Then they gave us money and led us to the next village. That is when they took the children away. After that they took us, the women. I don't know why they took the children -- for workers maybe, for slaves. These men had uniforms. The people who gave us food did not wear uniforms.

When they tried to take us, there was a battle. Our husbands tried to fight with them, but it was sticks against guns. Some husbands were killed, some wounded. The army was victorious. The remaining husbands fled into the forest. The army took us to their camp by a roundabout direction. We stayed there six nights, then the fighters divided us among themselves, choosing the most beautiful there were. We were sent to the huts of each fighter and always guarded, even when we went to the toilet. This is because they wanted to mate with us, they wanted children by us. Other than this, we did not understand them because we did not speak their language.

During the day we pounded maize for them. There were other wives, women previously captured.... When we protested, they beat us. I lived

²⁹ Sandra Steingraber, in Clay *et al.*, 1988, p. 89.

in a hut with three fighters. At night they exchanged me among themselves. This went on for two months.³⁰

Like many others, this woman was pregnant with a child whose father was a member of the SPLA. She was eventually released, though she could not relocate her husband, and intended to return to the remainder of her family who had been left behind when she was forcibly resettled from her home in Tigray.

The Anyanya 2 para-military force, which was supported by the Sudan government and the Gaajak Nuer militia, which was armed by the Ethiopian government, were responsible for similar abuses.

How many Died?

Resettlement certainly killed people at a faster rate than the famine. The mortality rate was particularly high in the early days of arrival at resettlement sites. Settlers in Keto, Wollega, refused to talk about death:

We did not talk about it. Even the word was avoided. We used to go round asking, "is there anyone who has 'slipped away'?" Corpses were carried off like sacks of maize; they were piled on a trailer and taken to mass graves, Christians alongside Muslims. Children were placed between the feet of adults. Grave diggers received extra rations of food.³¹

People apparently became numb to death. They no longer mourned. They slept, ate and drank coffee next to corpses. They no longer had the strength to dig proper graves. There were even occasions when the graves were so shallow that toes of corpses stuck out ...³²

In July 1985, Cultural Survival estimated that between 50,000 and 100,000 people may already have been dead on account of the resettlement

³⁰ Quoted in Sandra Steingraber in Clay *et al.*, 1988, p. 97.

³¹ Pankurst, 1990, p. 235.

³² Pankurst, 1990, p. 248.

program.³³ This figure is open to much dispute, but the researchers laid out their evidence for scrutiny. The UNEOE, anxious to give grand figures for the deaths attributable to the famine, never produced an estimate for the human cost of resettlement. The government-employed academic, Prof. Richard Pankhurst, wrote of Cultural Survival's mortality estimate: "the allegations made in such an unscholarly publication are so one-sided and so extreme that they can only be accounted for in terms of the selective use of data to support a preconceived political standpoint."³⁴ Prof. Pankhurst cited not one single piece of independent evidence in his rebuttal, but Mr Kurt Jansson of UNEOE was convinced: "this [Cultural Survival] survey has been convincingly debunked by the eminent Ethiopian scholar, Dr Richard Pankhurst ..."³⁵

Several investigations have been done into overall levels of mortality. These can be used to obtain an estimate for the total number killed by the program. In the following calculations, *minimum* estimates are consistently used for deaths. If medium estimates were used, the figures might rise by over 50 per cent; if maximum estimates were used, they would more than double. These calculations suggest that the Cultural Survival estimate was approximately accurate.

It is important to note that the population of resettlers was an abnormal population -- it contained very few children and old people, and was mostly adults in their prime of life (these people were deliberately chosen). As a result, the death rate would have been expected to be lower than the 20 per thousand per year that is the "normal" figure; it would probably have been a maximum of about 17.5 per thousand.³⁶

RRC figures for recorded deaths during the first year of resettlement indicate heightened death rates: 110 per thousand in Gojjam, 68 in Illubabor,

³³ Cultural Survival, 1985, p. 99. The estimate was for *total* deaths; the estimate worked out below is for deaths *in excess of* those that would have been expected to occur in the famine zone.

³⁴ Richard Pankhurst, "The Ethiopian Famine: Cultural Survival's Report Assessed," *Anthropology Today*, 2.3, (June 1986) p. 5.

³⁵ Jansson, 1987, p. 26.

³⁶ Derived from data in: Asmerom Kidane, "Demographic Consequences of the 1984-1985 Ethiopian Famine," *Demography*, 26, (1989) p. 518; and Central Statistical Office, Ethiopia, "Report on the Results of the 1981 Demographic Survey," Addis Ababa, 1985, data from Wollo.

42 in Keffa, 38 in Wollega and 34 in Gonder.³⁷ In Jarso and Keto, Wollega, the rates were 93 and 51 respectively.³⁸ These figures do not include deaths in transit camps, on the journey, or on arrival before the settlements were fully established and registration of deaths began. Neither do they include those who died while escaping.

The same RRC data indicate that in Pawe settlement, Gojjam, death rates in the first four weeks of registration were equivalent to 332 per thousand per year -- almost 20 times normal, falling away over the following weeks. In Keto, the recorded death rate over the first three months was equivalent to 122 per thousand.

An investigation was also done into death rates of newly arriving resettlers and those who had already spent several months in the resettlement sites -- thereby including deaths in transit. The sample included people from both famine-stricken areas (Tigray and north Wollo) and areas which had escaped the famine (parts of Shewa).³⁹ Only the results relating to the newly-arriving settlers from Tigray and Wollo were published, due to political pressure. These indicated a life-expectancy of around six years, compared to the normal of over 40 for the area. This level was possibly the lowest ever recorded in a scientific demographic survey, and for comparison was seven times worse than the mortality due to the 1972-3 famine in Bangladesh. The crude death rate was 123 per thousand, which, allowing for the over-representation of young adults in the population, is probably equivalent to a level of 150-175 in a normal population.⁴⁰

The author was obliged to blame the mortality rate on the famine. However, closer examination of the data indicates that the death rate recorded among the settlers already resident in the resettlement sites was almost equal (115) and that the rates were similar for those from both famine-zones and non-famine zones. The implication is that, instead of blaming the death rates on the famine, it is more logical to blame them on the resettlement program.

³⁷ Sivini, 1986, p. 232.

³⁸ Calculated from: Alula Pankhurst and Ezekiel Gebissa, "Report on a Study Tour of Settlement Schemes in Wollega," Addis Ababa, 1987, pp. 34, 58.

³⁹ Asmerom Kidane, 1989, pp. 515-22.

⁴⁰ The figure is also an underestimate, because the settlers were asked about deaths of family members. As many families were split up, many deaths would have occurred without the knowledge of other members of the family. Also, whole families could have died, leaving no-one to report on the deaths.

These findings indicate that death rates during the resettlement program were -- at a minimum estimate -- in the order of 100-115 per thousand, which is about six times normal for that population. In the famine-stricken areas, death rates were raised by about three-and-a-half times. About half the 1984-5 settlers came from such areas: this implies about 14,000 deaths *over* those attributable to the famine. One defender of the concept of resettlement drily noted that the program was "involving human costs higher than those caused by the famine."⁴¹

The other half of the resettled population was not suffering raised death rates before resettlement: about 31,000 excess deaths occurred among this group.

Deaths during escape must also be included. At least 100,000 settlers from Tigray and Wollo returned home. Interviews among refugees in Sudan indicate a death rate of at least 20% among escapees.⁴² This figure may be too high: assuming that only a minority escaped through Sudan, and that the death rates among those travelling inside Ethiopia were much lower, a minimum figure of 5,000 deaths during escape can be guessed at.

Thus, very roughly, a minimum of about 50,000 people were killed by the resettlement program.

Resettlement and Famine Relief

In addition to the direct human cost of the resettlement program, it involved enormous indirect human costs, by the diversion of resources. Resettlement sites and transit camps received priority allocations of relief food from the RRC. A food monitor commented: "Because supplies of RRC grain were insufficient, those beneficiaries registered for RRC distribution who had decided to stay in Wollo received no ration."⁴³ Voluntary agencies opposed this policy, at least implicitly, which led to a climate of suspicion between them and the RRC.

Between the conclusion of the first round of resettlement in May 1985, and the resumption of the program in October, huge stocks of undistributed grain built up around the temporarily unused transit centers, while people went hungry nearby. One agency report read:

⁴¹ Sivini, 1986, p. 235.

⁴² Sandra Steingraber, "Resettlement in 1985-1986: Ecological Excuses and Environmental Consequences," in Clay *et al.*, 1988, p. 47.

⁴³ Mitchell, 1986, p. 48.

There is a strong feeling of a serious scandal. The huge stocks are unjustifiable ... The pattern that emerges is quite clear. Huge quantities of grain have gone to the resettlement sites or are being held in stock. Wollo continues to suffer ... The general view is that the government is not interested in Wollo. It is either appalling neglect or deliberate mistreatment.⁴⁴

Between June and September 1985, the RRC consigned an average of 8,630 metric tonnes (MT) of grain to Wollo (population: three million) each month. The estimated need was 35,000 MT per month. Addis Ababa (population 1.4 million) received 12,000 MT per month over the same period. As though this were generous, however, the amount allocated in the following four months -- when stage two of the resettlement program was under way -- was a mere 1,535 MT per month.⁴⁵

The suspicion that relief programs were hindered in Wollo in order to facilitate resettlement is confirmed by a number of incidents in which the RRC intervened to prevent voluntary agencies from distributing food while recruitment of resettlers was proceeding nearby. "For example, party officials forbade two EECMY [Ethiopian Evangelical Church-Mekane Yesus] centres to distribute general rations when resettlement was carried out... Similarly, the Philadelphia Mission at Kundi was ordered to postpone distribution until resettlement in their woreda [sub-district] had finished."⁴⁶

The fear of resettlement prevented many rural people from coming to towns and relief centers for food or other activities such as trade. When 600 people were forcibly resettled in Korem in October 1985, 12,000-14,000 others in Korem abandoned the relief shelter and fled to the nearby hills. Fear of resettlement was a major reason for Tigrayans failing to come forward for relief.

The resettlement sites themselves were favored in relief distributions. "A sixty-year old settler from Kelala Woreda in Wollo pointed out, 'I have received more relief food here in the last three years than I had for so many years in Wollo.'⁴⁷ Ironically, the settlements needed to receive relief food every year from 1985 to 1991, even in years when the settlers' home

⁴⁴ Quoted in: Paul Vallely, "Starving Wollo: An Empty Excuse," *The Times*, London, August 14, 1985.

⁴⁵ Mitchell, 1986, p. 56.

⁴⁶ Mitchell, 1986, p. 51.

⁴⁷ Quoted in: Alemneh Dejene, 1990, p. 102.

areas in the north were self-sufficient. The government spent at least \$120 million overall on the program in its first four years.

Without the resettlement program, the relief program in Wollo, Tigray and north Shewa could have been implemented much more effectively, and an important hindrance to normal and essential activities such as migration and trade would have been removed. An unknown and unknowable number of people died unnecessarily as a result.

Resettlement and the Environment

The environmental justification for the resettlement program was perhaps the most persuasive -- the land of the north was so degraded that it was necessary to remove a significant proportion of the population in order for forestry projects and other programs of land reclamation to be implemented. However, there is good evidence that the program had the reverse effect.

The environmental impact of the program in the resettlement areas had been disastrous. Large areas of forest have been cleared, often in an indiscriminate fashion. Indigenous people have been displaced, and forced to settle elsewhere. A committee appointed by the Council of Ministers reported in 1988 that:

Unless concerted efforts were taken to arrest the accelerating rate of deforestation and soil erosion [in the resettlement areas], there would be a major imbalance in the ecosystem within eight years. The magnitude of this imbalance and degradation would be similar to that of the famine-affected areas of the northern highlands of Ethiopia.⁴⁸

The resettlement program has also contributed to degradation in Wollo. This is because the fear of resettlement is one factor that has contributed to many farmers being forced to behave in a purely short-term manner. More generally, a farmer who invests labor and resources on his land, for instance by building terraces or planting trees, may not remain to see the fruits of his investment because he is arbitrarily plucked from his village and sent hundreds of miles away. Worse, his activities may even make resettlement more likely, because they may arouse the envy or dislike of the PA committee members, so that they select him for resettlement. Five

⁴⁸ Quoted in: Alemneh Dejene, 1990, pp. 105-7.

per cent of Alemneh Dejene's sample of farmers in Wollo cited fear of resettlement as a reason why they failed to plant trees.⁴⁹

More generally, while all land and natural resources remain state-owned and subject to arbitrary disposal by an unchallengeable local authority, conservation initiatives will be discouraged. This is illustrated by the case of Abaselama in Wollo:

The landmark of this peasant association is a gully (caused by severe downhill flooding), which begins at the top of the hill and extends for several kilometers along the road until it reaches the plain.... In its twisted journey downward, this gully came within 20 meters of the house of one of the farmers interviewed for this study. The farmer took up the formidable task of planting eucalyptus seedlings in 1979, adding manure, building fences around the seedlings, and watering during the dry season. The fruits of his labor became evident as the seedlings stood taller than most of the huts around the area. His success became a subject of conversation in the village. Either out of envy or a plot organized by members or leaders of the peasant association, he was accused in July 1987 of planting trees on pathways belonging to the peasant association. The judiciary committee of the peasant association revoked his ownership of the trees, instructing him not to plant other seedlings around the gully.⁵⁰

This story ended happily with the researcher intervening with the regional Ministry of Agriculture to restore the enterprising farmer's right to his trees. But there are innumerable examples of peasants being discouraged from conservation initiatives for similar reasons. One of the most ironic is that those who are farming an area designated as a conservation area are liable to arbitrary resettlement, and the self-organized planting of trees and protection of soil by farmers is one factor which makes it more likely that the government will designate a place as a conservation area.

⁴⁹ Alemneh Dejene, 1990, p. 40.

⁵⁰ Alemneh Dejene, 1990, p. 43.

13. VILLAGIZATION, 1984-90

In late 1984, the Ethiopian government began a program of villagization, which was intended to regroup the scattered homesteads, small hamlets and traditional villages of the entire countryside into a completely new pattern of grid-plan villages, laid out in accordance with central directives. The aim was ostensibly to promote social and economic development and facilitate the delivery of services such as education and water supplies. According to President Mengistu:

Collecting the farmers into villages will enable them to promote social production in a short time. It will also change a farmer's life, his thinking, and will therefore open a new chapter in the establishment of a modern society in the rural areas and help bring about socialism.¹

In fact, like so many government policies, it had important counter-insurgency elements too. The experience of villagization in Eritrea since 1966 and Bale during 1979-84 suggests that social transformation may only have been a secondary objective. This is borne out by the fact that the nationwide campaign of villagization was started in Harerghe in October 1984 primarily in order to combat the activities of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). More generally, the program was conceived and executed in a military manner. When a delegation from Ethiopia visited Tanzania in 1978 to assess the results of that country's experiment with villagization, the members concluded that Tanzania's failure could be attributed to a lack of resolve — i.e. force.

Many of the aspects of the villagization program have been dealt with elsewhere,² hence this chapter will give no more than a summary of its impact. The policy was abandoned in March 1990.

¹ President Mengistu Haile Mariam, Report to the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Ethiopia, April 14, 1986.

² E.g. Survival International, *For their Own Good ... Ethiopia's Villagization Programme*, London, 1988; Jason Clay, Sandra Steingraber and Peter Niggli, *The Spoils of Famine: Ethiopian Famine Policy and Peasant Agriculture*, Cambridge, Mass., 1988; John M. Cohen and Nils-Ivar Isaksson, "Villagization in Ethiopia's Arsi Region," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 25, (1987) pp. 435-64.

Counter-Insurgency and Villagization in Harerghe

The government counter-insurgency measures of 1979-83 succeeded in restricting OLF activities in much of the southeast. In 1984, the Sidama Liberation Front was beaten decisively.

In the highlands of Harerghe, the OLF continued to be active in 1984. The government response included heavy bombing of areas such as Maya Qolo and Maya Guella, close to Harer town, and a large campaign launched in June, which lasted until August. The worst atrocity reported was destruction of much of the district of Daro Billiga in July, where 1,000 houses were reported burned and 6,000 cattle confiscated.³ According to the OLF, 102 peasants were killed, usually in front of the assembled villagers, for resisting forced relocation. The offensive coincided with the main planting season and directly contributed to harvest failure. Between May and October over 50,000 Oromo refugees fled to Somalia, and by December there were 30,000 displaced people in Dire Dawa. Immediately after the offensive ended, the government started a large-scale villagization program.⁴

The villagization in Harerghe was accomplished by force. Village leaders and Moslem religious teachers were detained (and sometimes executed) while army units instructed the villagers to relocate to a new site. Exemplary punishments were meted out to objectors, including mass public executions. Existing villages were burned, crops were often burned too, and cattle were stolen or killed. People were buried alive, and survivors raped, beaten or mutilated.⁵

In late November and December 1984, the air force bombarded several areas of the Gobelle valley, southwest of Harer town. In January 1985 there was a military offensive through the same area, in which there were several reported instances of killings of civilians. An unknown number of men were shot and killed on January 29, at Gonda Abbadh, while working as manual laborers on a government project. There was a second influx of refugees into Somalia.

In the new villages, the government (represented by cadres and militiamen) enforced a strict work routine. In some places, such as Habro

³ *Africa Contemporary Record*, 1984-5, p. B244.

⁴ Jason W. Clay, "The Case of Hararghe: Testimonies of Refugees in Somalia," in Clay *et al.*, 1988.

⁵ Numerous instances are reported in Clay, 1988 and Survival International, 1988.

district, several days' unpaid work per week on state coffee farms was also enforced.

The program included strict control of food supplies. This met two government aims simultaneously: it could obtain higher quotas of crops from the farmers, and it could deprive the insurgents of access to food. It was combined with fiercely-imposed restrictions on trade.

A particularly irksome part of the whole process is the central control over food supplies. Locals cannot eat what they want, and have reportedly been told not to give their children milk: cows are state property. Officials announced that the government would distribute 500 grams of rations daily to everybody. For farming families which have traditionally produced huge food surpluses and maintained a very varied diet, such control is anathema, especially since local people feared, justifiably, that the army and urbanites would cream off the highest quality food, leaving the villagers with a meagre diet of sub-standard grains...

Freedom of movement is greatly restricted in the villagized areas. People are forbidden to travel through the countryside. They could be shot if they do. The new villages are connected to each other and to cities by a network of usually new roads, built with forced labour. Troops can thus be deployed rapidly. The militia organizes security locally, making sure its members are recruited from another area -- in contrast to the past, when the militia was locally-recruited. The absence of social ties between the new militia and the locals probably accounts for what some refugees have described as the systematic rape of women.⁶

In addition, the villagization disrupted food production in the year of its implementation.

Village sites were selected with a view to defense, rather than access to water, fuelwood, pastures, or fields. Many farmers had to walk much greater distances to get to their fields, and some crops which require special conditions and attention had to be abandoned. This was particularly the case for villages which were relocated from highland to lowland areas. Villagers who previously followed a mix of farming and herding, moving each year from the village to dry season pastures, were forced to become

⁶*Africa Confidential*, 27.12, June 4, 1986, p. 7. The systematic rape of women by PA officials, cadres and others was also reported in non-insurgent areas.

wholly sedentary, and give up many of their animals. The combination of impoverished agriculture, greater extraction of food by the government and army, and the effective ban on local trade and migration, was instrumental in turning the drought of 1984 in the highlands of Harerghe into a famine.

The down-hill relocation of villages also led to the alienation of grazing land from pastoralists, including valleys used as drought-retreats. This was one factor in the creation of famine in the lowlands in 1984/5 and again in 1987/8, and a cause of inter-communal violence.

By mid-1985, over half of the highlands of Harerghe had been villagized. The remainder was relocated in a four month campaign between November 1985 and March 1986. In total, 2,115 new villages were constructed, and more than two million people relocated.

The second phase of villagization in Harerghe appears to have been conducted with less violence and more attention to local agricultural needs. Some "model villages" were constructed at this stage, with facilities such as an electricity supply provided. These were used as showcases.

The villagization program was effective, however, in restricting the military activities of the OLF. The existing splits in the OLF also deepened, with the Oromo Islamic Front gaining ground (see chapter 19).

Social Transformation and Villagization

Following the successful conclusion of the first stage of villagization program in Harerghe in June 1985, national villagization was declared as a program the next month. By August 1988, the government reported that over 12 million people -- about half of the rural population in the areas the government then controlled -- had been villagized. While the collectivization of agriculture was probably one of the ultimate goals of the program, fewer than four per cent of the farmers in the country were members of producers cooperatives by the time the policy was abandoned.

Cultural Survival draws a distinction between villagization implemented as a counter-insurgency strategy in war areas, and as a program for social transformation in non-war areas. This distinction is important, but the difference is one of degree. There has been insurgency in *all* the southern provinces. The government was also waging a form of economic warfare against the peasantry, partly in order to exact higher levels of payment, and partly because it feared the sort of spontaneous rural uprising that occurred in 1974/5, when there was no effective government control over the rural areas at all.

The villagization program in most of the south was implemented with relatively little violence. But there is no doubt that it was involuntary.

Cohen and Isaksson, who recount the implementation of the program in Arsi in a manner sympathetic to the government, note:

Indirectly there was psychological force. The experience of Arsi's inhabitants since Menelik's conquest [in the 1880s] has been that unless the writ of central government is followed, then the army and/or the police will enforce it. Knowing this, Arsi's peasants dismantled their houses, moved them to new sites, and reconstructed them on assigned compounds with few overt signs of resistance.⁷

The Arsi peasants' proximity to Bale and Harerghe, and their knowledge of the villagization program there, undoubtedly reinforced this preparedness to comply with official commands. The government's preparedness to withhold food aid from non-villagized areas also put pressure on villagers to comply with the program.

The implementation plan for each province was devised locally. While this decentralization could have avoided many of the errors associated with central planning, it also created a climate of competition for correctness and zeal between the cadres of different provinces; in 1986 the most successful officials were rewarded with prizes and promotions.

The creation of new villages involved a number of measures which led to unnecessary hardship and hunger. Government officials and cadres surveyed sites and insisted on house construction in the middle of growing crops. Labor was diverted from essential household and agricultural tasks. Houses of reluctant farmers were arbitrarily demolished. Levies were exacted from the peasants in order to finance the program. The villagers were moved before essential ancillary buildings had been constructed, such as latrines, kitchens and stables. Inadequate space for housing animals and long distances to pastures led to enforced sale of livestock.

In some areas of south-central Ethiopia, the staple crop is the root of the *ensete* (false banana) plant. This is a perennial plant which is traditionally grown around the homestead. Several agricultural experts recommended that villagization be deferred or canceled in *ensete*-growing areas, because the forced relocation would require the abandonment of existing *ensete* trees and it would be several years before new trees would achieve maturity. This advice was ignored, and villagization proceeded apace (though in some parts of southern Shewa, a compromise was reached whereby the existing dense pattern of settlement was merely rearranged). Some of the hunger that afflicts these fertile areas in 1991 can be ascribed

⁷ Cohen and Isaksson, 1987, p. 452.

to this policy. Similar problems affected villagization in coffee-growing areas and places where the mild narcotic leaf *chat* is grown.

A number of villages had to be relocated after their sites were selected by urban cadres in places without water, or where there was no drainage so that flooding was prevalent.

Resistance

The villagization program was deeply unpopular throughout Ethiopia.

Most rural resistance to villagization and its accompanying programs took the form of unobtrusive sabotage. Peasants would do the minimum possible amount of corvee labor⁸ on roads, schools and forestry schemes, and produce shoddy work. There are accounts of villagers planting saplings upside-down, certainly not from ignorance.

In some areas there was violent resistance. A notable example is Gojjam, where there is a long history of resisting central attempts to meddle in affairs connected with land (see chapter 3). Villagization in Mota district was achieved in 1986 only with the assistance of helicopter gunships sent from Addis Ababa. There are other reports of villagers killing or mutilating cadres sent to enforce villagization, for example, 25 people killed near Shashamane in Shewa, one in Gojjam, two in Sidamo, and an unknown number in Gamu Gofa.⁹

In March 1990, President Mengistu unexpectedly announced the abandonment of the villagization program. Almost overnight, the existing cooperative farms were physically stripped of their assets. Villagers -- for so long sullen and cowed -- suddenly displayed great energy and initiative in redividing their farmland and returning to their original homesteads, or at least laying claim to them in anticipation of a future move. In some areas, cadres were expelled from the villages, or fled anticipating retribution. In Mota, Gojjam, some cadres who tried to resist the dismantling of the village were killed by the peasants.

⁸ Forced labor exacted as a tax demand.

⁹ Survival International, 1988, p. 26.

14. ERITREA UNDER SIEGE, 1988-91

On March 17-19, 1988, the EPLF overwhelmed the Ethiopian army's northern command at Afabet. Over 15,000 soldiers were killed, wounded, captured or dispersed, together with a vast quantity of arms and ammunition, including 50 tanks. Three Soviet officers were captured and another only narrowly escaped. Building on the significant if less spectacular advances by EPLF and TPLF over the previous six months, this marked a turning point of the war. Three years and two months later, the EPLF occupied Asmara and the EPRDF occupied Addis Ababa, bringing an end to their respective wars with the central government. These last three years of the war in Eritrea saw no respite from mass abuses of human rights by the Ethiopian army.

Afabet and Aftermath

The EPLF capture of Afabet left the Ethiopian army in disarray. Within a week, the garrison at Tessenei was evacuated so as to bolster the defenses of Keren. This evacuation was carried out in good order. Barentu was also evacuated, on March 31, and the retreating units burned several parts of the town and looted many citizens of their possessions. The same day the garrison at Anseba, north of Keren, retreated under EPLF fire, and on the night of April 1-2, the EPLF overran the army trenches at Halhal. In order to save Keren from apparent imminent capture, Agordat was evacuated. The following six weeks saw fierce fighting around Keren, in which the army managed to recover its positions at Halhal; otherwise the new front lines did not change significantly.

The fighting saw many atrocities against civilians. One was witnessed by Zahra Ibrahim, an Almeda woman from Halhal.

In April the Dergue attacked Halhal and we were forced to run away. We ran to Wadaq Sabra where there are some caves. There were many people hiding in the caves. The soldiers came to us to kill us. I begged one of them not to kill me and my children -- I offered him sugar -- and he left me and they killed only the others. They killed so many, I couldn't count. It took one month to find the bodies and bury them. For three days I was wandering in the hills and my little boy died from hunger and thirst. There was a gas from the shells which made us cry and made the children very upset -- they cried all the time and became very thirsty.

[In May] we were [still] in Wadaq Sabra. The EPLF overran the area and killed many Ethiopian soldiers, and then left. We left with the EPLF -- there were so many dead soldiers that we had to step on them, and the streams were flowing with blood. The EPLF took us to the river Matafa.¹

Other credible reports of killings in April-May 1988 include:

- * April 5, Godeiti: 12 civilians shot dead and two wounded by soldiers (ten of the victims were aged 60 years or older).
- * April 15, Qazien: six civilians shot dead by soldiers.
- * April 20, Shebah: 18 civilians shot dead by soldiers.

On May 12, in Sheib in Semhar district, a large scale and well-documented massacre of civilians was perpetrated by the Ethiopian army. Idris Osman Enkersa was a survivor:

It was morning around 8 o'clock ... The enemy armored vehicles, 15 tanks, appeared on the Massawa side. They headed towards Sheib from the coast side. The tanks led [the soldiers] to Sheib and surrounded the village. The soldiers came into every house and collected the people by saying that "you have a meeting today." They gathered children, old women and men under a big tree.²

Amina Mohamed recounted what happened next:

We tried to run away but we were surrounded. The tanks moved in on us, crushing people in their way. My entire family was killed, except for my baby. For three days I lay in the midst of the bodies, pretending to be dead. At one point my baby started to cry. A soldier aimed his gun. I heard his companion say "don't waste a bullet. The baby will die of hunger anyway." The soldiers killed our animals and threw the carcasses in the wells. They searched women's corpses for gold nose

¹ Interviewed by Alex de Waal, Wad Sherifei, Sudan, March 1989.

² Interviewed by Jennie Street.

rings and earrings. After three days they left the village and I walked up here. That's all.³

About 80 people were crushed to death by the tanks. A further 320 were killed by gunfire, from both the tanks and the foot soldiers. All were civilians. Idris knew many of the dead:

Mohamed Shibeley Dery's wife with her son, his sister in law with her two sons; Ali Gira Wad Hamid's wife and his son, his son's wife with her three children, his daughter with her children; Hamid Wadi Hishay; Ibrahim Hamid Shibeley; Osman Hamid; Hamid Mohamed Cheiway and his mother; Hamid Kurub with his wife and his daughter; Hamid Ahmed's wife with her two daughters; Suleiman Ali Gidir with his sister and his sons; Hawa Osman Musa with her two sons....

On the same day and immediately following days, there were other killings of civilians at 30 other villages in the vicinity, in which at least 100 others died. For example, three were shot dead by soldiers at Beet Abreha the same day, and four at Fatna Arre at the end of the same week.

The air force also carried out a number of attacks on villages and other civilian targets. These included:

- * March 31: Melebso: 15 killed, 25 wounded.
- * April 2: Mensae Beit Shehaqu: five killed.
- * April: repeated attacks on Afabet, casualties not known.
- * April: Agordat: at least three civilians killed.
- * April: Anseba: two civilians killed.
- * May 7 and 8: Mensura: five civilians killed.
- * May 3 and 13: Halhal: at least three civilians killed in this and two other attacks.
- * May 19: Afabet: ten civilians killed.

³ Quoted in a film by Alter-Cine inc. (Daniele LaCourse and Yvan Patry) *The Forbidden Land*, September 1989.

These killings of civilians served no military purpose. They were intended merely to terrorize and punish the population.

The fighting and government reprisals displaced about 110,000 civilians, including over 70,000 from the Sheib area. About 40,000 fled to Sudan. These refugees described how they hid to escape the Ethiopian army and how it was not safe to inhabit a village during daylight hours. Instead, people spent the day hiding in the hills, returning home only at dusk. They could not wear bright clothing for fear of attracting the planes, and had to hang their washing to dry in the shade of trees. They could not light a fire to cook, because the smoke would give away their presence. Travel to Sudan was possible only at night.

One woman gave birth under a tree; the next night she had to continue her journey. She said: "I was lucky, we had a camel. I know of women who had to start walking the same day that they had given birth."⁴

The forced displacement of the population led to increased deaths, from thirst, exposure and disease. There was a severe malaria epidemic in the fall of 1988, and many of the victims were displaced people who had moved from the highlands, where there is no malaria and so they had no acquired immunity. A study of mortality among a population of refugees who arrived in Sudan during 1988 found that death rates approximately doubled during the period when the refugees were "on the road," and remained considerably higher than normal in the refugee camp, chiefly on account of diarrhoeal diseases and malaria. Most of those who died were young children. If the survey is assumed also to be representative for those who were displaced inside Eritrea, it would imply that about 1,430 people died on account of the displacement.⁵

The State of Emergency

The defeat at Afabet led President Mengistu to make his first public admission of the existence of the war for ten years. In a televised speech on March 31, Mengistu said that the money spent on the war each year could have built four major universities or ten large hospitals. He declared that extra effort was needed to meet the threat: "from now on, everything to the battlefield." A week later, after meeting with President Siad Barre of Somalia, Mengistu made the surprise announcement of a peace agreement

⁴ Interviewed by Alex de Waal, Wad Sherifei, Sudan, March 1989.

⁵ Alex de Waal, "Population and Health of Eritreans in Wad Sherifei," London, ActionAid, 1989, pp. 77-87.

with Somalia (none had been signed after the 1977/8 war), allowing the redeployment of troops from the Ogaden to Eritrea.

On April 6, the government expelled foreign aid agencies from Eritrea and Tigray. This included the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Only UNICEF was exempted.

This ban drew much adverse publicity from the international media, which appeared to assume that the absence of foreign personnel was equivalent to the complete cessation of the relief program. In fact, as the Ethiopian government was quick to point out, more than 80 per cent of the relief in government areas was distributed by Ethiopian organizations employing Ethiopian staff (chiefly the RRC and the churches). The intention of the ban was different: it was to remove witnesses for what was going to happen next.

On May 14, the government declared a State of Emergency in Eritrea and Tigray. As there was no pretence of civil administration in Tigray, and in less than a year no government presence in the province at all save a single garrison, it had little impact in that province. It is also questionable whether the State of Emergency had any significant impact in Eritrea, as the government already possessed an almost unlimited range of powers, and the legal system was already subject to continuous and authorized interference by the executive -- the country was under a permanent virtual state of emergency already.

The State of Emergency proclamation gave an "Overall Administrator" of Eritrea wide-ranging powers, accountable only to the President and the State Council. The security forces (including army, police, People's Guards and militia) were empowered to inspect any person or property and to detain anyone. Ten kilometer strips along the Sudan border and the coast were designated "prohibited areas," from which all people were required to move -- in effect making these "free fire zones." The Overall Administrator was empowered to convene military tribunals and to appoint their officers. These tribunals had jurisdiction over a range of crimes. The full list, as enumerated in Section V, 19 (i) and (ii) is reproduced here, in order to give a flavor of the military administration that followed.

- (i) Military tribunals ... have jurisdiction over crimes committed during the State of Emergency in accordance with the updated Special Penal Code Proclamation No. 214/1974 [Ethiopian calendar, i.e. 1981]:
 - (a) Crimes committed against the freedom of the country.
 - (b) Crimes committed against the constitutional order or against organs of that order.

- (c) Crimes committed against Ethiopia's unity and the unity of the people.
 - (d) Anti-revolutionary crimes.
 - (e) Crimes of armed terrorism and the waging of civil war.
 - (f) The crime of agitating and organizing.
 - (g) Crimes affecting the country's defense forces.
 - (h) Crimes against public property and wealth.
- (ii) In addition to the powers stipulated in sub-article (i) of this article, the military tribunals have the right to judge:
- (a) Crimes committed in violation of this special proclamation.
 - (b) Any crimes which the Overall Administrator of the area decides should be transferred to military tribunals from the ordinary courts.

Death penalties required the personal approval of the Overall Administrator.

Under the State of Emergency, the army continued to act with wanton brutality towards the civilian population. Over the following twelve months, some of the incidents in which civilians were killed included:

- * June 2, 1988, Godeiti: nine shot dead.
- * June 25, Mensae: four shot dead (including a six month-old baby), and three wounded.
- * September 16, Geleb: four killed by shellfire.
- * October 22, Mai Harasat: eight shot dead, including three old people and a five-year old girl, and eleven wounded.
- * October 31, Degera: three shot dead.
- * December 26, Tewro: eight shot dead.

- * February 1989, Semhar district: between 600 and 1,000 killed in Sheib and surrounding villages.
- * April 15, Sefea and nearby: 19 men thrown to their deaths over a cliff.
- * April 17, Logo: 19 men stoned to death.
- * June 3, Una Andom: seven shot dead (21 others were killed in nearby villages on the same day).

Some of the air raids that took place included an attack on Lego on June 10 (no fatalities reported), and a series of raids in Barka in September and October. The border area was a particular target, and at on least three occasions the MiGs crossed into Sudanese air space and attacked civilian targets inside Sudan. In October, two Sudanese locust-spraying planes were attacked, and in November there were two raids on Sudanese border villages in Red Sea Province, in which a school was damaged.

The policy of forced relocations into protected villages continued. In October 1988, about 5,000 people in four villages were forced to move to the protected village of Elaborod near Keren. They were given one day's notice of the move, and the soldiers took the opportunity to loot much property.

During the 18 months after July 1988, there was little large-scale military activity in Eritrea. In early 1990, that was to change.

Massawa, 1990

On February 8, 1990, the EPLF launched a surprise attack on Ethiopia's second port, Massawa, which it captured after a three-day battle. During the battle, the government forces retreated to an island some distance from the main town, taking a number of civilians as hostages. After repeatedly demanding that this force surrender, the EPLF attacked and defeated it. About 200 civilians were estimated to have been killed in the fighting, including some of the civilian hostages.

After the battle the port remained essentially intact, and required few repairs before it could function again. Starting shortly afterwards, the Ethiopian government pursued a policy intended to reduce Massawa to rubble.

The first air raids occurred on February 16. For eight days there were repeated attacks. The initial targets appeared to be the food stores, which contained about 50,000 tons of US-donated wheat, for famine relief. Incendiaries and napalm or phosphorous bombs were used, and about half

of this food relief was burned. Susan Watkins, an official of Oxfam Canada, who visited Massawa at the time, saw two warehouses and three stockpiles of grain burning, and commented "it was clear that food aid was the target of the bombardment."⁶ The grain was burned so systematically that piles were still smoldering one month later.

After the initial round of bombing, March was much quieter. The key issue in Massawa was whether the EPLF would be able to reopen the port. Yemane Yohannes, a senior technician in the port, told a visiting journalist "if a ship arrives tomorrow, we can handle it."⁷ He said that four diesel-powered cranes, three berths, four warehouses, and three tugs were still functional, so that relief shipments could be unloaded. Responding to an EPLF appeal for relief shipments, the German-based relief organization Cap Anamur sent a ship loaded with relief towards Massawa.

On April 4, the Ethiopian air force began another series of sustained attacks on Massawa. 30 people were killed and 54 seriously wounded. In three raids over the following four days, another 41 people died.

The inhabitants of Massawa were compelled to spend the daylight hours in air raid shelters -- in storm drains, under bridges, and in the cellars of houses -- or to evacuate the town altogether at daybreak, and spread themselves over large areas under trees, in order not to provide a target for the bombings.

On April 13, one of the encampments of evacuees, at Foro just outside the town was bombed. At least 25 civilians who were sheltering there were burned. One victim of these raids described what occurred:

When we got out from Massawa we were under the trees. We are just civil peoples. The aeroplanes have seen us [that] we are civil peoples. They came at nine o'clock ... They bombed bombs and napalm bombs. They have bombarded us for two hours.⁸

These attacks also used cluster bombs. Cluster bombs are a particularly deadly munition, as they explode before striking the ground and shower a large number of smaller bombs, each one lethal, over a large area. They are designed to kill large numbers of people. Their military use is against

⁶ Quoted in: *The Times*, London, March 3, 1990.

⁷ Quoted in: *The Guardian*, London, March 16, 1990.

⁸ Quoted in: Alter-Cine inc (Danielle Lacourse and Yvan Patry) *A Fight to the Death*, April 1990.

columns of infantry, but at this time Massawa was well behind the front line, and empty of military personnel. A foreign visitor to Massawa wrote:

ERA officials familiar with GoE [government] military tactics are shocked by a new kind of bomb which has only been used since the Massawa takeover. Everyone in the town is talking about this new kind of bomb, which destroys everything within a 100 metre radius, and which is particularly effective in shanty areas with flimsy housing structures.

These cluster bombs were almost certainly supplied by the Israeli government.

On the evening of Sunday, April 22, a particularly devastating air raid occurred. At 10:30 that morning, a raid had taken place. This attack produced no casualties, because the population was either sheltering or evacuated. The second attack occurred at 6:15 p.m., at dusk. This was after the last hour when attacks normally occurred, as the bomber pilots left themselves enough time to return to base before nightfall. The residents of Massawa had therefore left their shelters, and were in the streets on their way to church, market, or work place. One woman described how she was making *kicha* (unleavened bread) for the feast of *Medhanie Alem* (The Savior's Day, a monthly Christian religious feast), with her family when the bombs exploded. Another man was sitting with his family at home; only he and his sister in law survived. One woman, sheltering with her family in a drain under a road, described her situation:

The plane bombed us. The people are suffering ... entire families were wiped out -- not a single person left alive in the family. We did not come here [to the drain] to have a good time. We didn't come here for fun. We're having a bad time. Mengistu has decided to burn us like wood.⁹

Two cluster bombs exploded over a crowded street in the center of the town. About 50 people were killed and 110 wounded, many of them very severely.

Video recordings taken immediately after the bombing confirm that the casualties were civilians. One video, shot after the raid, contains pictures considered too horrific to be shown on public television: one shows the body of a woman with her face entirely burned away, another shows a dead

⁹ Quoted in: *A Fight to the Death*.

child with a hole in his face. Other pictures, marginally less horrific, include a close-up shot of a pile of bodies lying in the street, their flesh punctured with fragments from cluster bombs, and pictures of survivors with large areas of skin burned away; in some cases the raw flesh covering the entire back.

Massawa is a town with clearly separated docks, commercial and residential quarters, and the town itself lies some distance away from the military installations. The bombers flew low, at a height of a few hundred feet. They deliberately targeted the residential areas of the town, and attacked at an hour calculated to cause the maximum number of casualties among civilians.

This series of raids also used demolition bombs, and did severe damage to warehouses and other port installations, as well as destroying more than 100 houses. Parachutes were used to slow down the bombs' descent to ensure that they detonated at the correct moment. By this time, several offensives by the Ethiopian army aimed at retaking Massawa had failed, and it is probable that the bombing raids were now intended to destroy the port entirely. A woman resident of Massawa, Fatna Ari, commented "whenever Mengistu realizes that he is defeated he kills people with aeroplanes."¹⁰

On May 1, the Ethiopian government threatened to bomb any ship that docked in the port, forcing the ship chartered by Cap Anamur with its relief cargo to be diverted to Port Sudan.

On June 3, the question of famine in Ethiopia was raised at the Washington summit. Under pressure from the super-powers, the Ethiopian government conceded that Massawa could be used for relief deliveries. However, before this was officially announced on June 5, another air raid took place. Raids in the Massawa area continued until June 10. An EPLF spokesman responded: "the port facilities have been virtually destroyed by air raids ... I don't think Massawa could operate as a port for many months."¹¹ After early June, there were few air attacks on Massawa: one occurred on September 4 and another on October 24, in which one child was killed. These raids were probably carried out in order to demonstrate to the aid donors that any relief would be delivered to Massawa on the government's terms, or not at all.

¹⁰ Quoted in: *A Fight to the Death*.

¹¹ Quoted in: *The Guardian*, London, June 7, 1990.

The capture of Massawa by the EPLF also led to the government unleashing air attacks on other towns and villages in Eritrea. Some of the attacks included:

- * April 3: Afabet: 16 killed, 24 wounded.
- * April 4: Afabet: 51 killed, 125 seriously wounded.
- * April 17: Afabet: no fatalities.
- * May 21: Afabet: two killed.
- * September 13: Gedged: two wounded.
- * September 17 and 21: Matalili: no casualties, but several fishing boats destroyed.
- * September 22: Haicota: no casualties.
- * October 3: Koatit: no casualties.
- * October 11: Adi Ma'alim: three wounded.
- * October 14: Tikombia: three wounded.
- * October 14; Mai Shiro: three killed, one wounded.
- * October 16: Godeiti: two children killed.

The Siege of Asmara

The fall of Massawa led to the government being confined to Asmara and the surrounding area. The state of siege lasted until the defeat and surrender of the garrison on May 25, 1991. The siege witnessed the development of famine conditions in the enclave, which will be discussed in chapter 16. It also saw many abuses against civilians committed by the army and administration.

Placing Civilians in Danger

One abuse against civilians was a systematic attempt to retain them in and around the battle zones. This first occurred shortly after the fall of

Massawa, when the army made a series of attempts to recapture the port by attacking from Ghinda, which lies half way between Asmara and Massawa. All the attempts failed. On March 11–13, the army prevented the civilian inhabitants from evacuating Ghinda, so that their continued presence would provide a human shield for the army and deter EPLF artillery barrages. When it became impossible to live in Ghinda, many residents had to move to caves and other makeshift shelters nearby. Elsewhere in the enclave, the army also prevented civilians from leaving villages near the front line to go to Asmara, or removed them only a short distance. For instance, the people displaced from Massawa who tried to travel to Asmara were confined to Nefasit, just behind the front line at Ghinda.

Killings

The army continued to kill civilians on frequent occasions, though no massacres on the scale of Sheib occurred -- almost certainly because the army was no longer able to penetrate into EPLF-controlled territory.

The worst single incident occurred on June 9, 1990. A group of soldiers left their military base and entered the city. They shot dead 31 youths and injured at least 15 more. The killings took place in several parts of the city as the youths were returning home from watching a televised World Cup soccer match at Kidane Mehret in the city center. They were shot in the street and in the doorways of houses, just before the curfew hour. Other incidents include:

- * August 9: Hagaz, near Keren: two mothers killed.
- * Late August: Decamhare: about 20 peasant farmers were summarily shot by the army during a military engagement with the EPLF.
- * September 12: Asmara: soldiers shot dead 16 civilians.
- * September 27: Keren: two civilians were killed when soldiers opened fire (they claimed they were shooting in the air, celebrating the Ethiopian New Year).
- * January 1991: Tsazega: a girl of 12 was shot by soldiers while they were allegedly training.
- * January 18: Anseba: a girl of 16 was killed by soldiers with a knife while resisting attempts to rape her.

- * February 7: Adi Garma: two killed by soldiers.
- * February: Girgir, near Keren: two elderly women were killed by soldiers, one shot and one strangled.
- * March 28: Adi Quala: one man was killed by soldiers while returning from market.
- * April 3: Sheikha Wadi Bisserat: one was killed by soldiers.

Detentions and Restrictions

Another abuse against civilians was detention under the emergency powers given to the overall administrator. Civilians were arrested and detained on the slightest suspicion of sympathizing with the EPLF. Some were detained simply so that officials could obtain bribes for their release.¹² Some detainees were killed in prison. For example, on April 9, ten were executed in Mariam Ghimbi prison in retaliation for the EPLF assassination of the prison governor. One of those killed was Tsehay Gebremedhin, an employee of SEDAO Electric company.

Numerous restrictions were placed on civilians in Asmara and the other towns of the enclave. A curfew was imposed from 9 p.m. until dawn -- later it was brought forward to sundown. During the hours of the curfew, people were liable to be shot on sight. On several occasions, citywide searches were made, as on December 21, 1990, and again on February 21, 1991. All people were stopped in the street and required to produce their identity cards. Numerous people were detained on both occasions, especially women who were not carrying their cards, and people who originated from Tigray.

The army prevented people from leaving Asmara. People who tried to leave on foot were subject to summary arrest and detention. If they could, people tried to leave by air. Ethiopian Airlines flights came irregularly, and stopped altogether after an airplane was hit by a shell while standing on the tarmac on April 26, 1991. The cost of a ticket plus all the requisite payments and bribes to obtain travel documents was prohibitively expensive for most.

The administration began to organize the civilian population into civil patrols. In rural areas, villagers were required to take on security functions,

¹² For more details see: "Ethiopia: Human Rights Crisis as Central Power Crumbles," *News from Africa Watch*, April 30, 1991.

protecting roads, bridges and hillsides by mounting round-the-clock guards. They were required to report suspicious activity. Those who objected were detained and physically abused. In Asmara city, civil patrols were organized in February 1991. Each *kebele* was required to provide a guard for its neighborhood for four-and-a-half hours each night, and was held responsible for any suspicious activity during those hours. Civil patrollers were given no weapons, torches nor uniforms.

Shelling

The residents of the town were also at risk from shelling by the EPLF. Starting in March 1990, the EPLF began regular shelling aimed at the airport. The artillery was located at Bizen and Ala, some 30 kilometers away to the northeast.

The target of the shelling was the airport, and the apparent intention was to damage the military installations and aircraft there, and put the runway out of action. The shells damaged military transport planes, MiG fighter-bombers, a plane belonging to the RRC, airport installations, and an ammunition dump. Numerous soldiers were killed while leaving through the airport in April and May 1991. The airport was forced to close on several occasions on account of the shelling.

The shelling caused civilian casualties at the airport. In early January, 1991, three women were killed while waiting for an Ethiopian Airlines plane to Addis Ababa. On March 1, an airplane used for the relief airlift was hit while on the ground and one civilian was killed. An Ethiopian Airlines fuel tanker airplane was hit by a shell on March 22. On April 26, an Ethiopian Airlines passenger plane was hit by a shell and three passengers were killed.

The shelling also caused some civilian deaths in the town. In the first few days of the attacks, shells landed over a wide area, causing a number of civilian casualties, both from the blast directly and from fragments hurled over a large distance. After that, all the shells landed in the airport and the neighboring two quarters of the town, Godaif and Sembel. The EPLF warned the residents of these areas to evacuate their homes, but not all did so, in part because of the fear that their houses would be requisitioned by the army. Between March and June 1990 about 60 civilians were killed in the town by the shelling and 100 houses were badly damaged.

In late August, the shelling caused its highest number of civilian casualties. On August 20, one child was killed in a tank and artillery bombardment of Akria, Arbate Asmara, Inderase and Gabriel Church quarters of the city. On August 25, 17 civilians were killed. In the two incidents, 20 were also injured. The government reported the incidents,

acknowledging for the first time that the city was besieged by the EPLF.¹³ The EPLF, however, blamed the incidents on the government.

Circumstantial evidence suggests that the government was indeed likely to be responsible — certainly, residents of Asmara believed so. This was based on several considerations. One is that the source of the shelling was Balazar, to the north of the city; EPLF shelling came from the northeast. Second, the shells from the EPLF artillery took precisely sixteen seconds from firing to landing; these shells took less. Thirdly, the shells were of a different kind, and made a different sound.

Assassinations by the EPLF

Throughout the last years of the war, up until the weeks before the fall of Asmara, the EPLF continued to assassinate civilians accused of collaborating with the security forces. On average, the EPLF announced approximately one such assassination every two weeks in the last months of 1990 and the start of 1991. Victims included members of the Workers' Party of Ethiopia, informers for the security forces, and the governor of the Mariam Ghimbi prison, who was accused of torturing detainees. According to the EPLF, the offenders were tried *in absentia*, and were warned twice to desist from their activities. If they refused to heed the warnings, an assassination squad was dispatched. This practice was criticized by Africa Watch.¹⁴

Eritrean Opposition to the EPLF

Throughout the 1980s the EPLF was the militarily dominant Eritrean military front. However, it faced competition from no fewer than nine rival fronts or political organizations. The Eritrean Liberation Front—Popular Liberation Forces (ELF—PLF), headed by the veteran nationalist Osman Saleh Sabbe, split from the EPLF in 1975, and itself split in 1979, with the formation of the ELF—PLF—Revolutionary Council, headed by Osman Ajib. After Ajib's assassination, leadership was taken over by Abdel Gadir Jeilani, who is a Baathist who enjoyed patronage from Iraq. The ELF also split in 1977, with the formation of the Eritrean Democratic Movement (EDM) headed by Hiruy Tedla Bairu. In 1981 the ELF split into three factions, led by Abdalla Idris, Habte Tesfamariam and Giorgis Teklemichael.

¹³ AFP August 29, 1990.

¹⁴ *News from Africa Watch*, "Ethiopia: Human Rights Crisis as Central Power Crumbles," April 30, 1991.

Personal rivalries were at least as important as ideological disputes in creating the factionalism. By 1991 the ELF organizations consisted of:

- * ELF–Revolutionary Council: headed by Ahmad Nasir, secular in orientation.
- * ELF–United Organization: headed by Omer Buraj, Islamic in orientation.
- * ELF: headed by Abdalla Idris, Islamic in orientation, with close ties to Sudanese security (commonly known as the "ELF–Abdalla").
- * ELF–PLF: headed by Abdel Gadir Jeilani, Baathist.
- * Eritrean Islamic Liberation Front ("*Mujahideen*"), headed by Ibrahim Ali, Islamic fundamentalist in orientation, and supported by the international Moslem Brothers and the Sudanese National Islamic Front.

From late 1986 until about 1989, the ELF–Abdalla was involved in negotiations with the Mengistu government. According to the EPLF and rival ELF groups, the government provided military supplies. The ELF groups received support and sanctuary from the Sudan government, which also continued to support the EPLF.

In addition, there are Afar groups in favor of a united Afar territory and two non-combatant Eritrean organizations, both secular in orientation and headed by Christians:

- * *Sagim* ("Return"): headed by Tewolde Gebre Sellassie.
- * Democratic Front for the Liberation of Eritrea: headed by Gebre Berhan Zere.

Militarily, the most important of these organizations has been the ELF–Abdalla. Operating from bases around Kassala in Sudan, the ELF–Abdalla was involved in guerrilla attacks on the EPLF in southern Barka. The main activity was the planting of land mines (both anti-vehicle and anti-personnel) on roads and tracks used by the EPLF and ERA. Some of these mines were even planted inside Sudan, and in December 1989, Dr Lars Bondestam, a Swedish academic who had long experience of studying famine issues in Eritrea and northern Ethiopia, was killed when his car struck a land mine inside Sudanese territory. In August 1989, there was a battle between the *Mujahideen* group and the EPLF close to the Sudan border, which involved an intervention by the Sudanese army to support

the *Mujahideen*. Some military engagements have also occurred since the EPLF victory in May 1991.

The Fall of Asmara

In February 1991, the temporary lull in the war was broken with simultaneous offensives by the EPRDF into Gonder and Gojjam, and the EPLF into the Danakil towards Assab. In mid-May the EPLF also launched an assault on Decamhare, and captured the town on May 24. Army reinforcements sent from Asmara were surrounded and captured, leaving the road open towards Asmara. The garrison at Asmara surrendered the following day.

Throughout the siege of Asmara the residents of the town had feared a repeat of the massive bloodshed that had accompanied the ELF-EPLF attack on the city in January 1975. Ethiopian military commanders had also warned that Asmara would only be captured as a ruin. The air force had shown its willingness to bomb major towns such as Massawa and Meqele. These fears deterred an EPLF assault until the air force bases at Bahir Dar and Debre Zeit had been captured — the latter on May 24. By this time, fear of EPLF reprisals deterred army atrocities. To the great relief of all Eritreans, the city was captured intact, without either widespread destruction or loss of civilian life.

Most of the other garrisons in Eritrea followed immediately, with a significant exception. A large contingent of the Keren and Asmara garrisons decided to fight its way out to Sudan. This included about 75,000 soldiers, some family members, and some high-ranking members of the administration and security forces. They left Keren on the Agordat road, and fought with EPLF units at Barentu and on the road to Sudan. There are no accounts of them attacking civilians. More than one thousand soldiers died; mostly in action, but some on account of thirst. About 14,000 soldiers arrived in Sudan seeking asylum over the following few days. In total, the EPLF captured 82,000 prisoners of war and 44,000 dependents.

15. ARMED DECISION: THE NORTH, 1988-91

In Tigray, the year 1988 was the most savage in the entire history of the war. Atrocities were committed on an unprecedented scale by both army and air force. Many of the government actions were designed to reduce the population to a state of famine, such as the deliberate killing of oxen, burning of grain stores, and bombing of REST food convoys. This came on the heels of a drought in the summer of 1987. However, the number of war- and drought-displaced people never approached the scale of 1983-5. The reason for the failure of drought and war to result in famine was largely because the government was restricted to the towns and main roads in a way that had not been the case previously, and military action in the countryside was shortlived. The restrictions on movement and trade that had been so devastating four years earlier were no longer so effectively enforced because of the reduced government presence.

After three years of cool relations, the TPLF and EPLF began to coordinate their military activities again in April 1988.

In January 1989, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) was formed by the TPLF and EPDM. Two new organizations were added: the Ethiopian Democratic Officers' Revolutionary Movement (EDORM), which consisted largely of captured officers from the Ethiopian army, and the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), which was formed from among the Oromo of the Wollo escarpment and Oromo prisoners of war. The formation of the OPDO reflected and deepened a split between the TPLF-EPRDF and the OLF.

In February 1989, the TPLF-EPRDF occupied all of Tigray save one small garrison. Six months later it struck southward, right into Shewa. During 1990, the EPRDF concentrated on consolidating its gains, and in early 1991 launched three offensives in quick succession which finally destroyed the army and government of President Mengistu.

May 1988: The Army in Disarray

Following the EPLF victory at the battle of Afabet, the TPLF quickly succeeded in overrunning many garrisons in Tigray, including Enda Selassie, Axum, Adwa, Adigrat, Wukro, and Maichew. Government troops also withdrew from other areas.

In Enda Selassie, the retreating troops destroyed the town's electricity generator, which had been built by public subscription of 500,000 Birr in 1985. At the town's health center, the staff were ordered to load all the equipment and medicines on to trucks, which were then set on fire.

Retreating government troops committed a number of atrocities against the civilian population, including the forcible evacuation and burning of Farda village, in Raya district, on May 14.

The TPLF advance was followed by a number of punitive air raids. The raid on Wukro which coincided with food distribution by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has been described in chapter 11. Wukro was bombed on two other occasions. Other raids were carried out on Axum, Hausien, and other towns and villages. Korem was bombed on May 26, when people had gathered for a food distribution; there were 24 casualties reported.

The Bombing Campaign of June 1988

On June 1, the government counter-offensive was launched. The first stage was a bombing campaign of unprecedented severity. Some of the bombing raids included:

- * June 8 and 10: Seqota: four people killed or wounded, 71 houses destroyed, and the church of Endagabriel badly damaged.
- * June 10: Amdo: five people killed, including a mother and child.
- * June 12: Dejena: REST food convoy bombed twice.
- * June 14 and 15: Samre: in two raids, 17 people killed and one third of the town destroyed.
- * June 16: Ruba Kaza, Tsegede: no human casualties, but 24 domestic animals killed.
- * June 18: Samre: casualties not reported.
- * June 19: Enda Selassie: casualties not reported.
- * June 19: Dande, Raya district: 29 killed, 74 houses destroyed.
- * June 20: Abi Adi: four killed.
- * June 20: Sheraro: two attacks, casualties not known.
- * June 21: Enda Selassie and surrounding areas: casualties not known.

- * June 22: Hausien was destroyed; an estimated 1,800 marketgoers were killed (see below).
- * June 22: Samre and seven surrounding villages were badly damaged.
- * June 22: Abi Adi attacked:

"Two MiGs circled over the town and killed a pair of oxen that were ploughing a field just outside the town. The farmer escaped, but one woman was killed and four others wounded."¹
- * June 25: Enticho: 21 killed, seven buildings destroyed.
- * June 25: Mai Kenetal: three killed or wounded.
- * June 27: Atsbi: four killed, eight wounded, 109 houses burned, some animals also killed.
- * July 1: Adi Ramaz: casualties not known.
- * July 2: Mai Humer: casualties not known.
- * July 3: Adi Daro: casualties not known.
- * July 3: Sheraro: casualties not known.
- * July 3: Edaga Habriet: casualties not known.
- * July 8: Sheshebite: casualties not known.

Bombing attacks continued, albeit less regularly, in the following months. No air raids causing more than ten fatalities have been confirmed for the months July–December 1988, but many caused smaller numbers of deaths. An unknown number were killed when 98 houses were destroyed in Adi Hageray on August 19; eight were killed in Sheraro on December 12.

¹ Woreda Tekla, farmer, trader and member of Abi Adi *baito*, interviewed by Sarah Vaughan and Gerry McCann, November 16, 1988.

The Destruction of Hausien

The air raid on Hausien on Wednesday, June 22, 1988, was the most savage on record in Ethiopia during the three decades covered by this report. Hausien was a market town in north-eastern Tigray. The market attracted people from all parts of the province, and from as far away as Eritrea and Gondar. On a normal market day the town was packed with several thousand people, coming to trade in animals, grain, salt, coffee, and other commodities. Though Hausien was attacked eight times in mid-1988, the residents did not consider themselves to be at serious risk from air attack, because the area was not controlled by the TPLF, and most of the market-goers came from areas controlled by the government.² Unlike the practice in TPLF-controlled areas, the weekly Wednesday market therefore continued to be held during daylight hours.

The following account is reconstructed from the interviews conducted by two visitors to Tigray, Sarah Vaughan and Gerry McCann.³ Though the interviews were conducted in November 1988, the memory of the atrocity remained fresh in people's minds.

The bombing started in the late morning and continued until nightfall, following a carefully coordinated plan.

Blata Aragabi, a 57-year old farmer recounted the day:

It was Wednesday, and I was in the market square. At about 10 o'clock in the morning two helicopters came low overhead and circled for about an hour. An hour later they came back with two MiGs. They circled for a while and then bombed the market area, which was packed with people, and animals waiting to be sold. Apart from the market square itself, there was also a big animal market in the old school compound. The MiGs concentrated on the markets: no-one could have stayed alive in those areas. Meanwhile the two helicopters circled round trapping people as they tried to escape, cutting them down like leaves.⁴

² The fact that eight attacks warranted consideration as *below* average risk indicates the intensity of the bombing campaign. Only a small minority of the attacks are mentioned in this report.

³ They are reproduced in Sarah Vaughan, "Extracts from a Report on a Visit to Tigray, October 18 - December 13, 1988," London, War on Want, and Gerry McCann, "Between Heaven and Hell," *Observer Scotland*, April 16, 1989.

⁴ Hausien is in a valley and there are only two roads out of the town, so it is easy to seal off with just two helicopters.

[The bombing] started at 11 in the morning and went on until about 4 p.m. [at this point another man said it was later -- 5.30 p.m. -- and Blata agreed]⁵; almost until it got dark. Each time the MiGs and the helicopters had finished bombing they went away, and more kept coming, two by two. I don't know how many times new planes came; because of all the dust it was dark and people were crying all around me. It seemed to be about every half hour or so that they would leave, and there would be a few minutes interval. People would come out of where they were trying to shelter and pick up the bodies thinking it was all over. Then the planes would return.

The bombers used high explosives and cluster bombs; the helicopters used machine guns and rockets. Survivors were particularly disturbed by the "burning liquid" which fell from the airplanes, presumably napalm or phosphorous. "A," a priest, aged 41, described the scene:

It was so dark, the smoke hung over the town as if it were night. People were crying, confused, and hysterical. There was something that fell from the sky, like rubber, but it burned your flesh.... There was a lot of blood in the market place. So many animals were killed by being burned or poisoned. I don't know what the poison was but it was something that burned them. Those of us who were left wouldn't even eat the carcasses, or have them near our houses.

Blata again:

[In the market] most of the people and cattle were being burned by something that seemed like rubber. It burned as it dropped off the sky, and didn't cut like metal does.

A cluster bomb remained unexploded in the schoolyard after the raid and was photographed by Gerry McCann. It was unfortunately impossible to ascertain its origin.

Most people sheltered in houses, but the bombers turned on these too, using high explosives. When the day finished, there was scarcely a building left standing.

Iquar Gebre Giorgis, a woman beer-seller:

⁵ Other informants said that the bombing finished at 6 p.m.

I was selling *sewa* (local beer) in my house. Market day is always a good day for selling beer, and there were about 20–30 people in the house. I had my 13 year old daughter Negisti with me. When the bombing started we thought the safest thing would be to stay inside. They only seemed to be bombing the immediate area of the market. Soon, though, they started on the houses, and mine was hit. The roof on my house was not the usual tin, but wooden with heavy beams. The whole roof caved in, and the walls came down too. There was one woman who escaped being buried. She was crying and digging at the rubble, and she managed to dig out a man who had been buried up to his neck. Eventually the two of them dug me out, though I was buried from noon until 3 o'clock. We were the only three who survived from my house. Negisti died along with everyone else. Some of them we managed to dig out that evening were still conscious, but they died soon after. They were all farmers or traders, some from Hausien, some from the villages around. I knew most of them quite well; I can remember about half of them by name.

Haile Geresadie, a poor farmer aged 18:

[The bombing] started in the morning, and I was at the animal market with my parents and grandparents. The animal market was full of people and donkeys, but we ran as quickly as we could into the nearest house. The house was bombed, and out of about 20 people there were only three of us [who] survived. We were on the side furthest from where the bomb landed. My parents and grandparents were all killed. [The others] were just farmers and traders who ran in from the animal market. Some of them are still buried there.

I am always thinking about my parents, and often I just can't stop. Sometimes it is very difficult to get to sleep because it is always in my mind.

Zimam Hamenur, a woman spice trader:

All six of my family were in our house when it started, and we stayed there all day. After several hours a bomb came through the window and hit my daughter Fatima. Everyone else was unhurt but her right hand was cut off. Even then we stayed in the house — we were too frightened to go out, and we just sat and cried round my daughter.

After nightfall when the bombers had left, people contemplated the aftermath. The true number killed in the bombing will never be known. At first the TPLF claimed that 360 were killed, and 500 buildings destroyed, including nine stores, 15 shops, and a mosque. Later estimates by the TPLF were higher: 600 fatalities, then 750, finally an "official" figure of 1,300. Africa Watch believes that these figures are all underestimates. Most of the people attending the market in Hausien came from other places, so there was no list of the people present on June 22, and many of the dead and injured were quickly removed to their home villages. Some bodies remained buried in the rubble of buildings months later. According to the testimonies of the people of Hausien, the number of fatalities was as high as 1,800 or even 2,000.

Blata again, in response to the question of how many were killed:

You can't count grains of sand. Even now, six months later,⁶ we are still finding bodies. The last one was on Friday week: we found the head of a man and buried it. I heard from the [TPLF] fighters that thousands were killed, and a Dergue radio broadcast said that they had killed 3,000 bandits at Hausien.⁷ We buried between 100 and 200 in the churchyard, but there were also lots of bits of bodies --- heads and limbs --- and people took many of the corpses back to be buried in their own villages. ... People came here from different parts of the country, from Eritrea, from Wollo, for the market day.

Priests are responsible for burying the Christian dead, and so have a better idea than most people about the extent of the carnage. From priests "A" and "B":

As soon as the MiGs went away everybody started to work together to dig the bodies out of the rubble and bury the dead. We buried as many as we could immediately that night. The task of digging through the stones went on for over a month... [Asked: how many bodies do you think are still buried?] We could estimate the number that were found, but have no idea about those who were not. They came from Sheraro and from all over the region. In every *tabia* [village cluster]

⁶ The interview was conducted on November 20, which was in fact just under five months after the bombing.

⁷ No government broadcast concerning Hausien was published by the BBC Monitoring Service, so Africa Watch has been unable to check this.

or village you go to in this area you will hear that 40, 60 or 80 people were killed. Those from farther afield are harder to count.

An elderly man estimated that in the ruins of a hotel and a row of shops on one side of the market place, there were 250 bodies still remaining. Priest A gave his estimate:

I think about 1,800 were killed in total, when you include those who were taken back to their villages. There were probably another 1,000 wounded, and some of them may have died later. We buried 150 just in this churchyard, but many were too badly cut up for burial, or are buried just where they died. There were many priests killed, from Eritrea, Tembien, Adwa, even from Wollo. Sometimes as many as 10,000 people gather here for market day. No one can count the destruction of cattle and grain and money and all the property that was buried.

Not all bodies could be buried, or even identified. Haile again:

I couldn't bury [my family members] because they were burned away to ash. There was only one body that could be brought out [of the bombed house, in which about 17 people died], and even that woman was very badly burned.

Kesi Gebre Hiwet, a farmer and priest aged 54, came to Hausien the night after the attack. He spent the night digging people out of the ruins, and estimated the casualties at 2,000 dead and 800 wounded.

We found so many corpses, we went on digging until morning. Whilst we were digging we found dismembered hands and feet, but couldn't find the bodies they came from. In the morning we started to bury the dead and brought the wounded away. Four of those whom we brought back to this *tabia* died after two days.

Medical facilities are poor and many of the wounded died later. Coping with the injuries was a major problem. Zimam Hamenur needed to find treatment for her 15 year old daughter Fatima, whose hand had been cut off:

The next morning we and some neighbors carried Fatima to Nebelet; I had heard previously from some fighters that there was a clinic there. The TPLF gave her infusions and bandaged her, and kept her there for

a month. They wanted to take her to Tsai where there was better treatment, but on the way we heard that the enemy was coming so we decided to go to Wukro instead. We were quite frightened of going to a government town but to help my daughter's hand we had to take the risk.

I had to come back to Hausien to look after everyone else, and Fatima stayed in Wukro. We have a message to say she is better now, and we are expecting her back at any time. A while ago someone took my youngest daughter Neehna to see her sister in Wukro. She was very upset and cried whenever she thought about her sister. She used to wake up in the night crying.

There are reports that some injured victims were denied admission to government hospitals.

Many of the survivors were deeply traumatized by the bombing and will probably suffer from psychiatric disturbances such as post-traumatic stress disorder for the remainder of their lives. Tsehail Geredche, a woman aged about 30, lost her husband in the attack and spent many hours partly buried in the rubble. She was six months pregnant at the time.

After I was dug out I was delirious for some time -- I have been told it was for about three weeks. All I can remember is that I had a pain in my legs and that I was very frightened I had lost the baby. I think I was feverish. It wasn't for quite a few weeks I could take in what had happened, and think about what to do. The six other children were all safe, and also the baby; as you see, I gave birth two months ago. My husband was buried at the church.

The evidence of eye witnesses suggests that about 1,800 innocent men, women and children were deliberately killed in Hausien by aerial bombardment. Many others were severely injured and maimed, or psychologically traumatized. Apart from the scale of the carnage, what makes Hausien a particularly brutal atrocity is the systematic nature of the attack. It required careful planning to arrange for a succession of MiGs and helicopters to be present at Hausien, far away from the nearest airfield, in coordinated shifts throughout an entire day.

The motive for bombing Hausien can only have been terrorism against the people of Tigray, in part revenge for the military successes of the TPLF over the previous months, and in part "softening them up" for the government offensive. Hausien was probably selected as a target because, not being in a rebel-controlled area, the market still met during daylight,

and there were no TPLF fighters in the area with anti-aircraft artillery to make an attack dangerous. It had no military significance.

The Summer 1988 Counter-Offensive

The ground offensive started simultaneously with the bombing campaign, with the troops moving in to towns and villages a few days after air strikes. After some fierce fighting in north Wollo on the opening days of the attack, the TPLF stuck to its strategy of not holding territory, and allowed the government troops to reoccupy most of the towns on the main roads, and to pass through others. The army quickly moved from Woldiya to Korem through the Amba Alage pass. On June 4, soldiers attacked Harako village nearby: five civilians were killed and three wounded, 77 houses were burned.⁸ Another force moved south from Meqele to retake Maichew. On June 4-5, the soldiers burned six villages near Meqele (Adi Gera, Gobozena, Grarot, Rabea, Issala and Bahri), and on June 7, a further two villages were destroyed (Mai Wewe and Adi Guguad). Casualties in these atrocities are not known. After re-occupying the main towns of southern Tigray and northern Wollo, the army then moved into central Tigray, occupying Abi Adi.

On June 24, a large number of infantry -- three brigades -- came through the town. There was a large battle at Hagerai Selam, and *Dergi*⁹ was going to Adwa retaking the towns. No-one was killed, but they stole or destroyed a lot of property. A lot of goats were taken, and when they found oxen they would just cut off one leg, or cut out the liver without even killing the animals. They collected people's [farm] tools together and destroyed them. I lost 400 Birr and some of my furniture. From Abi Adi *Dergi* went on to Mai Kenetal.¹⁰

Government forces pushed north, taking Wukro, Adigrat, Adwa and Axum and then attacked western Tigray, taking Selekleka and Enda Selassie in early July. Another army column moved north from Gonder. However,

⁸ The following account owes much to information compiled by Barbara Hendrie.

⁹ Tigrayans often refer to the Dergue in the first person singular.

¹⁰ Woreda Teka, farmer, trader and member of Abi Adi *baito*, interviewed by Sarah Vaughan and Gerry McCann, November 16, 1988.

the TPLF regrouped and finally engaged the army in Shire and north Gonder in July, and defeated it.

On a number of occasions, government troops killed civilians. The following incidents have been reliably reported:

- * June 28 and 29: Adwa: 50 people killed, including 19 bayoneted and thrown over a cliff.
- * June 29: Hagerai Selam and surrounding villages: 341 peasants killed.
- * July 5: Netsege: 30 farmers burned in their houses by soldiers, 60 houses destroyed.
- * July 5: Hagerai Selam: an unknown number killed.
- * July 6: Mai Mekden: ten killed, three wounded, 25 houses burned.
- * July 20: near Maichew: a young girl thrown to her death over a cliff.
- * July 31: Adi Nebrid: 15 people killed, one wounded.
- * August 2: Kelish Emni: 13 people killed, two wounded, three houses burned, seven tonnes of grain destroyed.
- * August 9: Bahra and Senkata: many people beaten, two recently married couples taken away, four women raped.
- * August 9: Adigrat: seven women raped.
- * August 16: Mai Mado: five people killed, one wounded, 22 houses burned, grain stores emptied and the grain mixed with soil, many animals killed.
- * August 29: Adi Hagerai: 23 killed, 193 injured; the dead included five children deliberately burned, and many of the injured were cut and mutilated with knives.

By the end of August, large-scale military action had ceased, but army patrols continued to be routinely brutal. In October, at Tselessi Bit and Selekleka, 20 people were killed in five separate incidents, including people locked in their houses and then burned alive.

The bombing and ground offensive caused an estimated 60,000 people to be displaced from their homes by the end of July.

In the ground offensive, the army used mass columns of conscripts to attack TPLF positions. On at least one occasion, this amounted to mass slaughter. On July 7, an army column advanced north from its base at Dansha in north Gonder, straight into an ambush laid by the TPLF. The conscripts were in the vanguard: they were caught in a heavily-mined valley with TPLF fighters in the hills on both sides. Which ever way they turned they were cut down by gunfire or blown up by land mines. The TPLF claimed that nearly 3,000 were killed, wounded or captured. TPLF fighters later spoke of their distaste at the carnage. They said that in later engagements TPLF tactics changed, and concentrated on destroying the command unit in a military force.

The months from September to December 1988 were relatively quiet in Tigray, north Gonder and north Wollo, though intermittent bombing continued. For example, on September 8, Nebelet was bombed and several houses burned.

The Government Evacuation of Tigray, February–March 1989

In January 1989, the TPLF began to take the offensive, at first in north Gonder, and then in western Tigray. In a series of battles between February 15 and 20, a joint TPLF–EPLF force captured Selekleka and then Enda Selassie. The fronts claimed that 26,000 soldiers were put out of action, and it was certainly the government's worst defeat since Afabet. The army evacuated Humera (on the Sudan border) and Adigrat, and on February 27–28, the provincial capital, Meqele, was abandoned, leaving the government with only an outpost at Maichew. In effect, all of Tigray was under TPLF control.

The TPLF was stunned by the unexpected evacuation of Meqele and waited for three days before entering the town.

In each of the three towns of Enda Selassie, Adigrat and Meqele, the army and government officials caused widespread destruction before they left. In Meqele, on February 26, two army tanks shelled the electricity generating station, destroying completely five huge generators, each capable of producing one megawatt of power. Bedding and instruments from the hospitals were systematically looted by soldiers. Residents of the town looted many furnishings.

At 11 a.m. on March 21, airplanes bombed the generator at Enda Selassie, inflicting some damage. One woman was killed. Other raids included:

- * March 26: Humera: casualties not known.
- * March 26: Adwa: casualties not known.
- * March 27: Adwa: casualties not known; a rare example of a night attack.
- * March 30: Axum: three killed.

Punitive Patrols in the Tcheffa Valley

The success of the TPLF (now part of the newly-formed EPRDF) in taking control of all of Tigray was matched by less spectacular but equally significant progress in its penetration into more southerly areas of Wollo. This began to ignite disputes that had lain dormant, because until it became clear that the government was losing control, subjugated people had not dared to challenge the government's authority. The army responded to these local disputes and threats in a punitive manner. An example of this comes from the Tcheffa Valley in southern Wollo and northern Shewa.

The Tcheffa valley is a grazing area for Oromo and Afar pastoralists and drought refuge for all groups, including Amhara farmers from the highlands. In 1986, during villagization, Amhara highlanders were settled in the valley and piedmont. The new villagers complained of mosquitoes and that they were being settled in a grazing area, that was not appropriate for farming, and that this would upset the pastoralists. The government paid no attention.

During 1987/88 there was drought in the lowlands, and the Afars penetrated to the valley, leading to some armed clashes. The situation deteriorated during 1989, due to continued drought in the eastern lowlands and the presence of the EPRDF around Dessie and the perception that the government was losing control.

The Amhara farmers wanted to return to the highlands, the Oromo natives became increasingly militant, but a series of negotiations came to nothing. In March 1989, a party of armed Oromo horsemen came to Fursi sub-district. They clashed with the Amhara farmers (who had a militia), and eight were killed (on both sides). A rumor spread throughout northern Shewa that "the Oromo are rising in rebellion." The army was sent to pacify the area, arriving a few days later. The army mission became a punitive expedition. The soldiers went and hunted and killed as many Oromo as they could find. Only Oromo were killed.

Under the guise of preventing EPRDF activity and keeping the peace, the army occupied Oromo villages. They controlled all Oromo movements and demanded food from the villagers. There were numerous small

incidents of killings and wounding of Oromo civilians in marketplaces, at wells and on roads. This continued until October 1989. Over 200 Oromo are estimated to have been killed.

The EPRDF Southern Offensive, Late 1989

In late August 1989, as the government prepared an offensive into southern Tigray, the EPRDF struck first. By September 8, EPRDF forces had captured Maichew and Korem and were advancing along the main highway in Wollo. In October, Woldiya was captured and Dessie was almost taken, and in November, the advance guard of the EPRDF penetrated into northern Shewa. In late December, EPRDF forces captured the town of Debre Tabor in southern Gonder, to be driven out by the army a month later.

There were, as always, numerous bombing attacks on sites throughout northern Wollo and Tigray. The following have been reliably reported:

- * September 9: Chercher, Tigray: the marketplace was bombed and strafed; 148 people were killed and about 100 wounded.
- * September 9: Gobyee, Wollo: one killed.
- * September 10: Gobyee, Wollo: 21 killed, 100 wounded (market day).
- * September 12: Gerarsa, Tigray: four wounded.
- * September 19: Raya, Wollo: no fatalities reported.
- * September 20: Kulmelsk, Tigray: three killed.
- * September 22: Axum, Tigray: two killed, eight wounded.
- * September 25: Tekezze Bridge, Tigray: three killed.
- * October 15–November 2: Kobo, Wollo: four attacks. Casualties not known, but the clinic was strafed by helicopter gunships.
- * October 27 and 29: Meqelee, Tigray: 31 killed in the first attack.
- * November 5: Adwa, Tigray: no fatalities reported, two trucks destroyed.
- * November 15: Zalembsa, Tigray: 14 wounded.

- * November 21: Sheraro, Tigray: 31 killed, 60 wounded.
- * December 27: Adwa, Tigray: four wounded.
- * January 1, 1990: Adi Nebried, Tigray: two wounded in a church.

The attacks on Meqele town deserve special mention. They were significant because they showed that the government was prepared to attack a major Ethiopian city, a provincial headquarters and former imperial capital (1871-89). The city was more than a hundred miles behind the front line and had no military importance. It was also an unusual attack because news of it filtered back to Addis Ababa and caused widespread, though muted, public outrage.

The Meqele attack caused many residents to leave the town. The hospital was evacuated during daylight hours, with all patients returning at nightfall for medical attention. Even at night, no electric light was used for fear of attracting the attention of overflying high-altitude Antonov planes, which were occasionally used for bombing at night.

For the first time, there was also widespread bombing in Gonder and central Wollo. Some of the raids included:

- * November 13: Kara Mishig, Shewa: one killed, 25 houses destroyed.
- * November 15: Tenta, Wollo: no fatalities reported.
- * November 16: Degollo, Wollo-Shewa border: no fatalities reported.
- * November 16 and 17: Woldiya, Wollo: no fatalities reported.
- * January 4, 1990: Tenta, Wollo: two killed.
- * January 10: Wurgessa, Wollo: one woman killed, five houses destroyed.
- * January 13: Nefas Maucha, Gonder: 23 killed.
- * January 23: Deha, Wollo: seven killed.
- * January 25: near Debre Tabor, Gonder: 15 killed while sheltering in a storm drain under a road.
- * January 28: Isitayoh, Wollo: 40 killed (most of them in the church of Kidane Mehrat).

* January 29: Wegel Tena, Wollo: two killed.

The army was mostly in retreat during these months. There was widespread looting in several towns, including Kobo and Dessie, but fewer reported incidents of attacks on civilians. One incident occurred on September 17, at Goby in north Wollo, when at least one civilian was killed in an army rocket attack, which destroyed four houses. The same day at Zaremna, nearby, two civilians were killed by soldiers.

The EPRDF treatment of the civilian population during this offensive appears to have been remarkably good. EPRDF fighters and cadres were reported as entering villages and telling the inhabitants that they would not be harmed and their possessions would be respected. They took inventories of commercial and private stores in the towns they occupied to prevent looting. No incidents of violence against civilians have been reliably reported.

Relative Quiet: February 1990–February 1991

In the twelve months from February 1990, there were no major offensives by the EPRDF. There was more-or-less continual skirmishing in north Shewa and southern Gonder, but the only major battle was a failed assault by the army at Alem Ketena in June. It was, overall, a remarkably quiet year in terms of abuses against civilians by the army. This is probably because the army was now fighting in mainly Amhara areas, and the officer class of the army, which is dominated by the Amhara, was less willing to sanction abuses against other Amhara than against Tigrayans, Oromos, Somalis and others. The pattern of abuses is more akin to the result of a breakdown in morale and discipline than to deliberately-planned mass killings. However, a number of incidents warrant mention.

In March 1990, the army first evacuated and then re-entered Bahir Dar after a battle with the EPRDF. On re-entering the town, soldiers killed an estimated 50 civilians. According to some accounts, the soldiers were drunk and ill-disciplined.

Between March 15 and April 7, in Dessie town, soldiers killed 16 civilians, including two children. On at least some of the occasions, the soldiers were off-duty and had been drinking.

Another incident occurred in June. Members of the army garrison at Melkawarar in the Awash valley of northern Shewa became involved in a dispute with the local Afar inhabitants. The origin of the dispute is

unknown but is rumored to be related to *chat*¹¹ chewing. Over 20 Afar civilians were killed in the fight that resulted.

If these and other similar incidents could be described as occurring without official sanction, the same cannot be said of the continuing air raids against civilian targets. Some of the raids included:

- * March 28, 1990: Wire Ilu, Wollo: grain stockpile burned.
- * May 2: Rama, Wollo-Shewa border: two killed.
- * May 2: Alem Ketena, Shewa: four killed.
- * May: Merhabete, Shewa: casualties not known.
- * May 5 and 9: Kolesh and Ambat, Shewa: six killed.
- * May 11: Kinche, Shewa: 21 killed.
- * June 10: Ticha, Shewa: 23 killed.
- * June 23: Adi Abun, near Adwa, Tigray: one wounded.
- * August 1: Zinjero, Wollo: no casualties reported.
- * October 5 and 14: Meki, Wollo: five killed, six wounded.
- * October 19: Mehal Meda, Shewa: four killed, five wounded.
- * October 22: Temsa, Wollo: a family of eight killed, ten others wounded.
- * November 7: Woldiya, Wollo: one killed, one wounded, and relief offices burned.
- * November 7: Kul Mesk, Wollo: seven killed, eight wounded.
- * November 27 and 29: REST stores near Sudan border bombed and strafed: 3,000–4,000 metric tonnes of grain burned.
- * December 27: Woldiya, Wollo: nine killed, close to a relief store.

¹¹ *Chat* is a mildly narcotic leaf widely grown and chewed in Ethiopia.

- * February 13, 1991: Debre Tabor, Gonder: two killed, ten wounded.

Operation Teodros

On February 23, 1991, the year of relative quiet came to an end, when the EPRDF announced "Operation Teodros," aimed at destroying the army in Gonder and Gojjam. The announcement of the launch of the offensive, its aims and timetable, showed an increased confidence by the EPRDF. The EPRDF clandestine radio also instructed the citizens of the towns in Gonder and Gojjam to guard the civilian infrastructure of their towns to prevent looting, such as had occurred in Meqele before its capture.

One factor that assisted the EPRDF offensive was the growing alienation of the local people from the government. This was related to the heavy conscription campaigns of the previous year, and the disarming of the local militia in western Gojjam following a revolt in March-April 1990, coinciding with the abandonment of the villagization program.

Within a fortnight Operation Teodros achieved its aims. The offensive was so swift that there was little chance for the army to undertake reprisals against civilians, though two incidents deserve mention.

One incident was the systematic execution of prisoners in Gonder town during the three days before its capture. Most of those killed were Tigrayans detained in the town's prison for suspected sympathies with the EPRDF, and the executions appear to be an act of pre-emptive vengeance. Jenny Hammond, a British writer who visited the town the day after its capture by the EPRDF, spoke to townspeople who reported that about 120 detainees had been killed, and the executions of 100 or so more had been scheduled for the day of the EPRDF takeover. Later, Ms Hammond met Dawit Berhane, a Tigrayan merchant who had spent three years in prison on charges relating to alleged irregularities in obtaining a truck license. Dawit related how 19 of his cellmates (17 of them Tigrayans) were taken out and executed the day before the town fell. Dawit himself was scheduled for execution, but the official authorization mistakenly had his father's name made out as "Berhe", so he was sent back to his cell for another day while this administrative error was rectified. Due to be executed at 6:00 p.m., he was released by the EPRDF at 4:00 p.m. Dawit believed that 300 detainees had been executed in the final days, and said that during the previous three years over 3,400 people had been executed in the prison, 90 per cent of them Tigrayans.

A second incident was the long-distance shelling of Dejen town in Gojjam on April 16, after its capture, in which six people were killed.

The EPRDF advance brought it into conflict with the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), which had an armed presence in western Gojjam (see chapter 18).

In the aftermath of the offensive, the EPRP and the government made a number of allegations about killings, detentions and looting by EPRDF forces. One incident was the killing of three senior government officials, including a security chief and a military commander, by peasants.¹² Reports indicate that the officials and their armed escort opened fire on the peasants, and were killed in the ensuing battle. Other alleged incidents include the use of lethal force against anti-EPRDF demonstrators and the detention of many political opponents. The facts surrounding these cases have not yet come to light.

Following the capture of the towns in Gonder and Gojjam, traders from Tigray and Eritrea immediately entered them to buy grain for transport north — grain was cheap in these areas and expensive in Tigray and Eritrea. According to one visitor, "deals were struck before the corpses were buried." The EPRDF forces also sealed government grain stores. These actions caused panic among some local people, who feared that their grain was being confiscated.

In late March, as the government attempted to counter-attack into Gojjam, the EPRDF launched Operation Dula Billisuma Welkita (Oromo for "Equality and Freedom Campaign") into Wollega. This captured Nekempte, headquarters of Wollega, on April 1, and then advanced southward and eastward, towards Addis Ababa. Following the battle for Nekempte, retreating government troops looted several parts of the town. By this time, the army was on the verge of complete rout, and was unable to regroup for any significant counter-offensive. By the same token, it was unable to engage in systematic violence against civilians.

Shortly afterwards, the EPRDF occupied Fincha'a, which is the site of the hydro-electric power station which serves Addis Ababa. The power was not cut off, though the EPRDF contacted the Addis Ababa municipality by telephone to ask for senior engineers to come to carry out urgent maintenance tasks.

On April 28-30, the air force bombarded Fincha'a town and hydro-electric station, and one civilian was killed in the town and one worker wounded at the power station.

¹² See: "Ethiopia: Human Rights Crisis as Central Power Crumbles," *News from Africa Watch*, April 30, 1991.

The Final Days of the Mengistu Regime

In what can only have been an act of deliberate spite against the Tigrayan people, on May 8, the air force carried out a raid on Sheraro in Tigray. Sheraro had had no military significance for more than four years, but retained its symbolic significance as the first town occupied by the TPLF, and its "home". According to reports, 15 civilians were killed and 90 wounded.

One week later, the EPRDF launched "Operation Walleign"¹³ on the Wollo front. Dessie and Kombolcha were captured the following day. In the battle for Kombolcha, an ammunition dump was blown up, causing extensive damage to the town and an unknown number of civilian casualties. The EPRDF claims that the dump was deliberately ignited by retreating soldiers, but this has not been confirmed. By May 20, the government lines throughout southern Wollo and into northern Shewa had been overrun. This coincided with a government defeat at Ambo, west of Addis Ababa, and the city was effectively undefended on two sides. President Mengistu fled the country the next morning.

President Mengistu had always boasted that he would fight to the last. Publicly, he compared himself to the Emperor Teodros, who committed suicide rather than surrender to his enemies. Mengistu's reputation for intransigence and courage was the last asset the government had; loyal soldiers respected him and were prepared to continue fighting. When Mengistu fled, the keystone that had held together the remaining elements of the government and army was gone. The army -- 450,000 strong just months before -- disintegrated. Tens of thousands of soldiers abandoned their posts and flocked into Addis Ababa, selling their weapons or using them to intimidate people into giving them food and drink. Looting became common. Other soldiers took off their uniforms and went home. Some senior officers in the army and air force fled abroad, mostly to Djibouti. Only a few elite units inside Addis Ababa maintained loyalty to the acting head of state, General Tesfaye Gebre Kidan, but a mutiny broke out on May 27 and there was fighting around the Presidential Palace.

The final week of the war consisted in a slow EPRDF advance on Addis Ababa itself. EPRDF forces surrounded the city, capturing the crucial air force base at Debre Zeit after a small battle.

During May, western diplomats and the UN repeatedly urged the EPRDF to refrain from attacking Addis Ababa before the US-convened peace talks

¹³ It was named after the Oromo student leader mentioned in chapter 4.

opened in London. They expressed fears for the safety of the civilian population should there be fighting in the city itself.

The final assault on Addis Ababa took place on the morning of May 28. Almost all of the army had melted away, and resistance to the EPRDF advance was light. There were pockets of street fighting throughout the city, but the only sustained exchange of fire occurred at the Presidential Palace, where an ammunition dump also exploded. According to the ICRC, there were about 200 deaths, both combatants and civilians. Those who died were either caught in the crossfire or killed by the explosion; there is no indication that either side targeted civilians.

It later transpired that a second explosion had also occurred at an ammunition dump at Shogole the same morning. Eye witnesses said that local residents began looting the arms depot, whereupon a fighter from the EPRDF fired a rocket-propelled grenade, which caused a huge explosion. An estimated 500 people died. When a German pastor spoke to a camera crew from a news network, claiming that the explosion had been caused deliberately, his words were cut by an EPRDF censor. However, as one journalist commented, "even if a rocket was fired, no one could have imagined the appalling consequences."¹⁴

Before dawn on June 4, another explosion occurred at an ammunition dump in the Nefas Silk area of the city. Approximately one hundred people were killed and 130 wounded, including several firefighters and members of the EPRDF who were trying to assist victims. There was extensive damage to property. The EPRDF claimed that it was the work of saboteurs loyal to the previous government, and said that they had detained several suspects, one of whom was a former army officer caught while trying to launch a rocket-propelled grenade at a fuel truck. This account was confirmed by at least one western diplomat.¹⁵

On entering Addis Ababa, the EPRDF prohibited all forms of public demonstration. However, protests against the EPRDF occupation soon took place. EPRDF fighters responded by firing, at first over the heads of the demonstrators, and then into the crowds. Eight were killed on May 29 and two more on May 30, and a total of 388 were injured, according to Red Cross estimates. The EPRDF claimed that members of the crowds were armed, and pointed to an incident in which two EPRDF fighters were

¹⁴ Richard Dowden, *The Independent*, London, June 2, 1991. At previous explosions at ammunition dumps, such as Asmara airport in January and Kombolcha in May 1991, there had been a series of smaller explosions and fires, allowing most people to escape.

¹⁵ Jennifer Parmelee, *Washington Post*, June 6, 1991.

killed by an assassin at the university campus. Some protestors were armed with weapons, including hand grenades, and the crowds had pelted the fighters (who had neither riot shields nor training in crowd control) with stones, and on at least one occasion opened fire. One journalist commented: "Even street kids have automatic weapons ... It's as if the millions of dollars of Soviet military aid have all arrived in the capital at once."¹⁶ After these killings, and after the explosion of June 4 had shown that members of the previous regime were still active in armed opposition, the protests disappeared.

Journalists also reported the summary execution of two members of the security service of the former government by members of an EPLF unit which had participated in the assault on the city.

The occupation of Addis Ababa cost between 600 and 800 civilian lives, most of them in the explosions at the ammunition dumps. Much of the violence was the work of retreating government soldiers, and it is likely that the EPRDF occupation of the city prevented further lawlessness and loss of life.

¹⁶ Jenifer Parmelee, *Washington Post*, May 31, 1991.

16. THE POLITICS OF RELIEF 1989-91

In the summer of 1989, there was widespread drought in Eritrea, Tigray and parts of Wollo, leading to fears of a repeat of the famine of 1983-5. Those fears were intensified when the summer rains of 1990 were also poor, and there was a near-complete harvest failure throughout Eritrea. Fortunately, to date, these fears have not been realized. There has been considerable hardship throughout Eritrea, Tigray and northern Wollo, and pockets of suffering amounting to severe famine in one or two places in Eritrea. But there has been neither the mass migration to relief shelters and refugee camps that were characteristic of the 1983-5 famine, nor mass starvation.

This chapter looks at the causes of the famines in Tigray/north Wollo and Eritrea respectively, and also at food shortages elsewhere in the country.

Scarcity in Tigray and North Wollo

In both 1989 and 1990, the harvests in Tigray and north Wollo were very poor. Rainfall was as low as in 1984, and production was further hampered by lack of oxen -- a legacy from the 1983-5 famine, the presence of land mines, and the inadequate marketing system, with many rural markets still held at night for fear of bombing. Nevertheless, according to an independent crop assessment mission, in both years there were surpluses in Shire and Raya, of about 50,000 metric tonnes (MT) and 100,000 MT respectively. Surpluses in north Gonder were not assessed, but were certainly substantial.

Throughout the period 1989-91, all of Tigray and north Wollo was controlled by the EPRDF, which meant that the famine relief could not be distributed by the government RRC or voluntary agencies working alongside it. Food relief could only be brought in with the consent of the government, or by working cross-border from Sudan.

Because the war had a direct impact on all famine relief operations for the first time, the link between war and famine began to be identified by the western media. In the case of Tigray and north Wollo, this is ironic: from 1989 onwards, this area was very largely at peace. The specific effects of the war were confined to sporadic air raids, shortages of consumer goods, and obstacles to the delivery of relief. These burdens were much less onerous to rural people than the military offensives and government restrictions and exactions of the early 1980s.

In the areas where fighting occurred, it now consisted largely of conventional battles between the opposing armies of the government and EPRDF. Several factors exacerbated food shortages:

- * In the immediate vicinity of the front line there was disruption to villagers' lives by the fighting itself.
- * The army garrisons imposed a considerable burden on local resources, usually requisitioning food, and often demanding that local women come and prepare it for them (see chapter 17 for examples from northern Shewa).
- * In the Oromo areas of the Wollo–Shewa escarpment and Tcheffa Valley, army patrols and checkpoints imposed tight restrictions on movement and trade.
- * Surveillance of migrants and trades was generally stepped up, and more local militia were mobilized to perform these routine functions.

However, with a few isolated exceptions, the level of harassment and restriction never approached that imposed in Tigray and its borderlands in the early and mid-1980s. This was probably because the army was operating in mainly Amhara areas, and persisted in seeing the conflict in ethnic terms -- as against Tigrayans. The army was also unable to penetrate into EPRDF-controlled areas to inflict damage, and from February 1990 onwards, there was little fighting on the central Wollo front on account of the international relief operation being mounted there. The constant skirmishing occurred in southern Gonder and northern Shewa, both areas in which food supplies were better. Consequently, irrespective of levels of relief assistance, the famine of 1989–91 was always going to be much less severe than that of 1983–5.

EPRDF Policies

From 1989, the EPRDF consistently implemented a policy of trade liberalization, and the intra-regional movement of grain was not hindered. Migrant labor was also possible, though in Tigray the TPLF tended to discourage it and preferred people to remain in their villages to engage in programs of environmental protection such as afforestation and terracing.

The high degree of internal security and ease of mobility within Tigray and the adjoining areas led to the functioning of the economy in a way that approximated "normal" for the first time for 15 years. Together with

the absence of the government counter-insurgency strategies, this was undoubtedly the main factor in preventing the severe droughts leading to severe famine.

Relief Programs

A relatively efficient relief program also contributed to the lack of famine. The program consisted of three elements: "internal purchase," cross-border food deliveries, and the Joint Relief Program (JRP) of the Ethiopian churches. The government tried to obstruct all three, but had neither the determination nor means to succeed.

Internal peace made possible the large scale purchase of local surpluses for redistribution as famine relief. This program, known as "internal purchase," proved to be the quickest and cheapest way of providing relief. Although the actual prices paid for the grain were relatively high, this was offset by cheaper transport costs.

Throughout 1989 and most of 1990, the cross-border relief program from Sudan was the single largest contributor of relief food to Tigray. The transport was slow and expensive, because of the long distances, the rough roads, and the fact that convoys could move only at night because of aerial bombardment. There were numerous attacks on relief trucks.

The JRP arose out of the recognition in late 1989 that the heavily drought-stricken areas of the country were under the control of the EPRDF. The plan was for the Ethiopian churches to organize transport and distribution of relief to Tigray. Initially, the relief was to be provided through government-held areas of Eritrea, but after the capture of Massawa this changed to the "southern line" through Wollo.

Initially, there was much skepticism about whether the JRP would actually work. Those doubts seemed to be confirmed when the program became mired in a set of disputes:

- * The government and churches claimed that the roads needed repair; REST and the EPRDF said that their vehicles had no difficulty passing them.
- * The government insisted that the JRP vehicles should not leave the main north-south road; REST argued that the most needy areas were away from the road, and that it would be unnecessarily disruptive for people to migrate to the roadside to receive relief.
- * The government and churches insisted on doing their own registration of beneficiaries, and required all family members to be present at the

registration; REST replied that it already had lists of needy people, and requiring all family members to come for registration required a three to four day walk for many, and would create chaos. (After such chaos did indeed ensue, and several people were injured, the requirement that all family members be present was dropped.)

- * The JRP wanted to start distributions in north Wollo first, arguing that this was the area hardest to reach by the cross-border route; REST wanted distributions to start simultaneously in Tigray.

The first trucks moved north from Dessie and crossed into EPRDF-held territory on March 20, 1990, only one week behind schedule. However, during the following six weeks, progress was slow -- only four per cent of the target amount was distributed, all in Wollo. In May, one third of the target was met, including distributions in Tigray, and from then until the following March, distributions averaged over 80% of target. The program became a success, and matched the cross-border operation.

Despite the government's recognition that rebel-held areas actually existed and needed relief, and the fact that the size of the JRP operation was calculated on the assumption that REST would provide cross-border relief to much of the population, the government continued to bomb cross-border relief routes. On January 29, 1990, a REST food convoy was bombed in western Tigray; three trucks were burned, one local herder killed, and two REST employees wounded. On November 27 and 29, 1990, REST food stores near the Sudan border were bombed and more than 3,000 tons of relief food destroyed.

A food monitor noted the resulting ironies:

It was interesting to compare this [the JRP's] very impressive fleet of white Mercedes trucks with the REST fleet of trucks. The REST fleet is also made up mainly of Mercedes trucks, but due to the Ethiopian government's propensity for bombing relief convoys coming across the Sudanese border, these have all been painted a camouflage green colour. In Tigray the JRP fleet is only allowed to travel during the day. The REST trucks, on the other hand, can only move during the hours of darkness ... during the daytime they have to remain hidden under trees or buried in trenches and covered with canvases.

The success of the JRP owed little to the government, which continued to harass the program at frequent intervals. It did not allow food monitors to travel with the JRP convoys -- all the monitoring was done by aid agency staff who had come in on the cross-border route. The requirement

that all beneficiaries travel to the roadside was feared by many people as the prelude to a government offensive up the main road. The government even bombed some of the towns where JRP distributions were taking place. On November 7, Woldiya in north Wollo was attacked. One woman was killed and one girl injured, and the offices of the Ethiopian Relief Organization (the counterpart to REST working alongside the EPRDF in Wollo and Gonder) were burned. On December 27, Woldiya was bombed again. Both these attacks disrupted relief distributions.

However, on the whole the JRP had the additional benefit of bringing tranquillity to the people in its vicinity. Neither side launched significant military action on the Dessie front for almost one year after the program started. The bombing attacks along the JRP route, though prominent because well-documented, were much less frequent than elsewhere. This allowed people to travel and work in the day-time and markets to meet during the daylight. A semblance of normality returned to the towns along the main road.

Problems with the JRP intensified in February 1991, when the EPRDF launched Operation Teodros. Though the fighting was confined to Gonder and Gojjam, and so did not affect the environs of the JRP route, government interference intensified. On March 12/13, the government launched an attack on the EPRDF-held town of Wichale, the first rebel garrison on the JRP route. This held up a food convoy. On March 18/19, the EPRDF counter-attacked on the west side of Dessie. Though this did not endanger the JRP route, the government decided to halt the JRP at once. (In fact, the timing of the decision suggests that it was made before the EPRDF attack was launched.) On March 20, the EPRDF issued an ultimatum that the program should restart within one week. Three days later the government complied.

In early April, the government detained seven drivers working for the JRP. This may have been related to an attempt to requisition their vehicles for military use. This immediately led to other drivers, who were in EPRDF-held areas, refusing to return to Dessie for fear of arrest. Fearing the halting of the program, the EPRDF also made the "release" of trucks conditional on the arrival of new relief convoys -- it was attempting to hold some vehicles as "collateral" to ensure the continuation of the program, but this served to slow down the rate of delivery.

These disruptions meant that by May the JRP was delivering relief to only one quarter of its intended beneficiaries.

On May 16, it was the turn of the EPRDF to halt the program, as it launched its Operation Wallelign to capture Dessie and Kombolcha. The EPRDF claimed that the government had already halted the deliveries before the attack was launched, but the sequence of events is not clear. The final

days of Mengistu and the following week of General Tesfaye Gebre Kidan's rule saw no further deliveries.

Though it takes up most of this account, the story of the relief programs of 1989–91 is in fact relatively marginal to the story of how rural people succeeded in surviving the drought of 1989–91. The main components of that survival were the absence of ground war and the absence of restrictions on trade and movement, which enabled the economy to function in an integrated manner. The absence of outright famine, despite more severe drought than in 1983–5, serves as witness to the fact that drought need not create famine, and that the reason why the appalling famine developed in 1983–5 was not because of the weather.

Famine in Eritrea

In 1989, most of Eritrea was controlled by the EPLF, including, from February 1990 onwards, the port of Massawa. This created a mirror-image of the situation in Tigray: relief for the government-held enclave around Asmara could only be brought in either with the agreement of the EPLF, or by using an expensive airlift.

Famine in Eritrea during 1989–91 contrasted with Tigray. The siege of Asmara led to famine conditions developing in the city of Asmara and the surrounding enclave. Throughout the 1980s, Eritrea had always been more dependent on food aid than Tigray and north Wollo. The substantial cutback in relief aid that coincided with the siege was therefore more serious. In addition, restrictions on the commercial movement of food and requisitioning by the army garrison played an important role in creating famine in the enclave. Government tactics of enforcing a food blockade are familiar from the first siege of Asmara, in 1975. Finally, western Eritrea is economically integrated into eastern Sudan, and the unprecedented shortages and famine in eastern Sudan from mid-1990 onwards aggravated the problems caused by drought and war. Therefore the famine in Eritrea during 1989–91 has proved to be more severe than during 1983–5.

Famine in the Asmara Enclave

Eritrea is, even in normal times, a food deficit area. For the city of Asmara and the surrounding area, there is an even greater relative food deficit. The 1.1 million civilians in Asmara and the surrounding area which was the government-controlled enclave would normally consume about 15,000 tons of food per month. Usually, the great majority of that is imported, either by traders operating in western Tigray and Gonder, or by

government marketing organizations. Since the mid-1980s, regular delivery of food relief has also been important.

The disruption of all the supplies of food simultaneously in February 1990 brought Asmara very quickly to the brink of famine.

Before the fall of Massawa, grain was cheap in Asmara. Shortly after the siege began, the price of grain in Asmara rose more than ten times to over 700 Birr per quintal. This was far more than the great majority of the residents could afford, and made famine inevitable. Normally, the lure of profits would have brought grain traders to Asmara, paying bribes to cross the battle lines. In the first eight months of the siege, this hardly happened. The army prevented large quantities of commercial grain reaching the city. There were instances in which grain was confiscated by soldiers when people tried to bring it in. Residents who were caught with grain traded from EPLF-controlled areas were regularly detained and punished. There were even instances in which people travelling by air from Addis Ababa to Asmara, and bringing food with them for their relatives, had this food unloaded from the airplane at Addis airport.

The policy was partly dictated by the increased bribes that soldiers could charge because of the grain scarcity, and partly by a deliberate plan to make the civilian population of the town suffer.

From February until October, the army's ban on free movement of commercial food into the enclave, together with a ban on free movement of people out of the enclave, was the single most important reason for the hunger affecting the civilian population.

In October, in recognition of the severity of the food situation, the administration lifted the ban on free movement of food. The normal checks on traders continued, and bribery remained rife, but punishments were no longer meted out to those found in possession of food from outside the enclave. General Tesfaye Gebre Kidan, the Overall Administrator, justified this change in policy. He told a meeting of Asmara residents that government relief supplies had in the past ended up feeding the rebels; now it was the turn of the rebels to feed the government. This pragmatic policy did not end the hunger, and nor did it reduce the price of grain by very much, but it prevented the famine in the city from developing into mass starvation, as had appeared inevitable.

One factor that contributed to the famine in Asmara was increasing unemployment. The siege led to many enterprises being cut off from their suppliers or their markets, so they were forced to lay off workers. Some government-owned industries were also closed down, dismantled and relocated in Addis Ababa.

Requisitioning by the Army

The army in Asmara and the surrounding areas often requisitioned food from the residents. This was probably the second most important cause of the scarcity. While some of the requisitioning was looting by undisciplined soldiers, much of it was certainly based on directives from the military command. The wheat militias ceased to be paid their ration and instead turned to looting.

The requisitioning of food and other commodities and removal of people was based on powers given to the military authorities under the State of Emergency legislation.

The impact of the army's requisitioning is conveyed in a letter from a civilian in Asmara:

March 15th 1991

Dear [brother],

Asmara has become a living hell and I can't see how we are going to survive for long.

The food consignment from Massawa is unreliable and inadequate.¹ Worse still is what little we get from the UN and the churches is stolen by the town boys [i.e. government soldiers] at night. In the Edaga Hamus area many families including mine have been broken into by hungry soldiers. This happened to us twice during February when three armed soldiers broke into our house and took away our two week ration of flour, sugar and oil. Five of my friends in other parts of Asmara told me of similar incidents. This is happening all the time.

My brother, we are facing a slow, terrible, undignified death! Asmara is now dying ... Sadly, Ker [Keren] is also in a state worse than Asmara ...

Apart from the instances mentioned in this letter, some incidents of requisitioning included:

- * The confiscation of half of the food stocks of an orphanage in Decamhare;

¹ The shipments were in fact arriving regularly but the government did not inform the citizens of Asmara of that fact.

- * The confiscation of large numbers of cattle and other livestock in at least four villages in Akele Guzai district and the area surrounding Decamhare;
- * The people of Senhit were required to feed the garrison there;
- * In the area of Chendek (near Keren) there was an order prohibiting people from picking *beles*, a cactus fruit eaten as a famine food in times of shortage, so that it was reserved for the soldiers;
- * In the Adi Teclezan area, north of Asmara, the residents of ten villages were moved by military order and all their property and food stocks were then requisitioned. A similar instance occurred at Adi Beyane.

Fortunately, the supply of food and money to the garrison (which numbered about 120,000 men) never broke down entirely, so that the army did not have to depend completely on requisitioned food.

The military also requisitioned other scarce items, such as fuel and medicine. There were three military hospitals in the city, with 6,000 beds. Because these were too overcrowded, the army also requisitioned half of the 820 beds in the civilian general hospital, and with them, half of the time and equipment of the hospital staff. Two civilian doctors and several nurses and auxiliaries were also required to serve in the military hospitals. Much of the supply of drugs to the hospital was often bought by the military; it was paid for, but the hospital could not obtain replacement supplies.

Food Relief through Massawa

When the EPLF captured Massawa on 8–11 February, 1990, the port was closed to relief shipments. A month later, the EPLF announced that the port had been repaired and appealed to the UN to supply relief. The Ethiopian government shunned this offer and repeatedly bombed the town, killing over 100 people, destroying many buildings, and burning about 25,000 tons of food aid. A ship chartered by the German relief organization Cap Anamur was sent towards Massawa loaded with food, but on May 1 the government threatened to destroy it with aerial bombardment. Despite diplomatic pressure from the western aid donors, the government did not yield and the ship was diverted to Port Sudan, from where its cargo was transported across the border by ERA.

At the Washington Summit in early June 1990, Presidents Bush and Gorbachev discussed the issue of Massawa and called upon Ethiopia to

allow the port to reopen. The Ethiopian government complied and ceased the bombing raids two days later.

This was followed, in July, by an attempt to open Massawa. A ship chartered by the World Food Programme (WFP) with four port technicians sailed from Djibouti towards Massawa on July 14. Their mission was to assess and repair the port facilities so that large shipments could be handled. Several days of negotiation followed, concerning the conditions under which the technicians would enter the port. No agreement was reached. On July 21, the ship abandoned its mission and returned to Djibouti.

The failure of the WFP mission appears to have been the result of too many actors playing different roles in the whole process, each with a different agenda, and inadequate communication between them. The Ethiopian government allowed the mission to go ahead at a moment when it suited its diplomatic and military needs. Thus it coincided with a visit to Washington by Foreign Minister Tesfaye Dinka, with the intention of obtaining US blessing for Israeli arms deliveries to Ethiopia (the resumption of the emigration of the Ethiopian Jews was announced at the same time). The Ethiopian government also tried to impose conditions on the mission which it knew the EPLF was unwilling to accept, such as the ship remaining in radio communication with Addis Ababa. The WFP was anxious to send its technicians to the port as quickly as possible. The EPLF was communicating at different times with the WFP in Rome and USAID in Washington; the latter not only wanted the technicians to land in the port, but the ship to dock there as well, in order to make the political point that this was possible. The EPLF also demanded full information on the consignees of any relief grain that arrived in the port after it was opened — it did not want to lose total control of the operation to the UN, nor see the grain consigned to the RRC in Asmara. The mission was aborted when an EPLF demand that the WFP technicians be allowed to land in a small EPLF boat was not passed on to WFP, but was rejected by USAID. WFP — which might well have accepted this demand — believed that the mission had been rejected outright, and turned the ship round.

Claims made in the press at the time, for instance that the EPLF had turned back two ships carrying grain, were unfounded — the additional ships did not exist.²

Despite the agreement in principle to open the port, the government bombed it again on two occasions in September and October, to demonstrate that it still reserved the final decision.

² *New York Times*, July 22 and 25, 1990.

After prolonged negotiation, and the near-complete absence of further media attention, on January 18, 1991, Massawa finally opened for relief shipments. Over the following four months a ship chartered by WFP, the *Far Suez*, made six round trips from Djibouti and brought over 60,000 MT of grain. This was divided into halves, with one half allocated to ERA for distribution in EPLF-held areas, and the other half to the RRC and the churches in the government-held enclave.

Despite skirmishing on the Asmara-Massawa road (initiated by the government), there were no interruptions to the supply to Asmara.

The difficulties started when the grain arrived in Asmara. 6,000 MT of the first shipment was distributed by churches, but the larger quantity consigned to the RRC, over 20,000 MT, remained in stock for several months. The excuse given by the administration for the lack of distribution was lack of fuel, but this was extremely lame because fuel supplies continued to arrive regularly until March 22, and much of the food was due to be distributed in Asmara city anyway, where the horse had become the preferred mode of transport. The distribution only started belatedly in May. It is likely that the administration was keeping the food as a reserve to distribute to the military in case the siege was tightened further.

Airlift of Relief

From May until January, the only relief supplies that arrived in Asmara came by air. Like the supply through Massawa, the airlift was subject to political controversy and manipulation.

The Ethiopian government proposed a relief airlift to Asmara in February 1990. In March, the UN came up with a plan acceptable to the Ethiopian government for an airlift from Assab and Djibouti. The donors, however, were unhappy with the proposal that the food should be distributed by the RRC, fearing diversion to the military. Instead, they insisted that the food be consigned to the Ethiopian Catholic Secretariat (ECS). The airlift began on May 3, using two chartered Hercules planes flying from Assab and making four trips each per day. This allowed the delivery of a maximum of 4,800 MT per month, considerably less than the 8,000 MT that ECS estimated that it needed to provide half rations for the 1.1 million people in need. In addition, due to shelling of the airport, bad weather, and the need for maintenance work, the UN airlift was able to deliver less than the maximum figure: by the end of February it had delivered 36,000 tons, or 75% of maximum capacity. A plan to airlift food using Soviet transport planes was proposed in June but never materialized.

The Ethiopian government had 26 civil and 16 military aircraft available for transporting food. Not one of these aircraft was ever employed for this task.

The EPLF warned against the airlift, and later renewed its "warning to those quarters which are still involved in military intervention by transporting military materiel to the Dergue government pretending it is relief and humanitarian aid."³ It warned that the airlift would continue at its own risk. This referred primarily to the delivery of supplies by Ethiopian Airlines planes and the proposed airlift using Soviet aircraft. (Soviet-supplied Antonov transports were also airlifting military equipment to Asmara.) The EPLF also said that an airlift was unnecessary because food could be delivered to Asmara through Massawa or overland from Sudan, using the routes used by ERA.

The suggestion that the UN relief airlift was transporting military supplies was untrue. However, the civilian and military airports in Asmara are not wholly separate, but share the same runway and other facilities. The airport was also used for the airlift of military supplies (usually ten flights each day) and was the base for bombing missions by MiG fighter-bombers. It could thus be considered a legitimate military target.

In the event, an implicit understanding was reached whereby the EPLF did not shell the airport while the relief flights were arriving or on the ground. The EPLF was always aware of the timing of the arrival of the relief flights. This inevitably gave immunity to attack to any military aircraft that happened to land at the same time. However, the EPLF did continue to shell the airport at other times, with the intention of putting it out of action.

On March 1, an airplane used by the UN-ECS airlift was struck by a shell and one employee of ECS was killed. This brought the airlift to an end. It is not clear whether this incident was an accidental violation of the tacit agreement, or whether, after the reopening of Massawa, any such agreement had lapsed. The EPLF certainly argued that the airlift was no longer necessary after January because of the opening of Massawa. However, the food supplied through Massawa remained inadequate for the needs of the Asmara enclave, just as it was not enough to feed the needy people in EPLF-controlled areas.

The shelling of the relief airplane and the halting of the airlift again demonstrates the complexity of the ethical issues involved in determining when starvation is being used as a weapon. If the actual incident of shelling

³ Voice of the Broad Masses of Eritrea, *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts (SWB)*, ME 0806, July 3, 1990.

was an accident, it was part of a more general attempt by the EPLF to close the airport, which would have stopped the airlift anyway. If any tacit agreement not to fire when relief airplanes were in the vicinity had lapsed, it had done so in the context of two developments: the supply of food from Massawa (which was not for the most part being distributed) and the imminent military collapse of the government, which was hastened by the intensified bombardment of the airport.

Relief in EPLF-Held Eritrea

Both 1989 and 1990 were years of severe drought in EPLF-held areas of Eritrea. Combined with the economic decline of the two main sources of employment and marketed goods -- Asmara and eastern Sudan -- this spelled famine.

ERA continued its own distributions in the areas of Eritrea controlled by the EPLF. In 1990, over 100,000 MT of grain was transported across the border from Sudan and donated to people affected by drought and war: a far larger amount than that distributed in the enclave. This relief was allocated to needy people according to lists drawn up by village committees. A spokesman for ERA commented that some of this food later found its way into Asmara, as recipients gave help to their needy relatives: "this food is always transferred from one hand to another at the end of the day." ERA offered to set up distribution centers in EPLF areas, to which the residents of Asmara could come and collect a ration. Implementing this proposal would have required a massive extra donation of resources to ERA, but in any case the government did not respond.

The Ethiopian government remained resolutely opposed to the humanitarian activities of ERA: "any attempt to supply food aid across the border is contrary to the sovereignty of the country ... and has absolutely no acceptance by the Ethiopian government."⁴ ERA food convoys were still subject to aerial bombardment. On January 5, 1990, at Tserona, an ERA food convoy was bombed. On September 3, near Tessenei, one truck carrying relief was burned in an air attack. On May 10, 1991, at Tekombia, Barka, two trucks carrying relief were damaged in an air raid.

Shortages in the South

In 1990/91, there were also shortages in a number of parts of southern Ethiopia, such as Harerghe, Gamu Gofa and parts of southern Shewa. These

⁴ Voice of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa; see BBC *SWB*, ME 0704, March 5, 1990.

occurred despite the fact that the abandonment of Marxist economic policies in March 1990 and relatively good rainfall had contributed to a national bumper crop. These localized shortages can be attributed to a number of factors.

The most important factor is the legacy of the previous decade of unremitting attacks on the economic base of the peasantry. The legacy of villagization and other disastrous policies left many rural people extremely vulnerable.

A second factor is that when the "change in direction" was announced in March 1990, the Agricultural Marketing Corporation's procurement for 1989/90 was already half complete, so that many areas were damaged by the old policies. A related factor is the incomplete liberalization; for example there was no deregulation of motorized transport, which meant that farmers who lived more than a day or two's walk from the nearest urban market did not benefit from the regulated market in grain and other foodstuffs. In addition, the "change in direction" meant that provincial and district administrators had more local autonomy in decision making, and some enforced hard-line restrictions on trade and other activities.

The area in which human rights abuse most directly impinged upon food production was conscription. The conscription campaigns of 1989-91 were unprecedented in their size and scope (see chapter 17). Not only were large numbers of young men taken from their homes and farms to serve in the army, but the fear of conscription forced them to be in a state of readiness to flee to the hills at any sign of soldiers or government officials. Though it has not been investigated fully, it seems likely that some of the areas of greatest shortage in 1990/91 were areas in which the conscription campaign was conducted most extensively.

A final factor contributing to food shortages was the temporary breakdown in law and order in some parts of the country following the collapse of the Mengistu government. Retreating soldiers sold or abandoned their guns. In areas such as Wollaita (southern Shewa) and Harerghe, the opportunity was taken for looting, which contributed to an interruption of relief programs. For example, about 800 MT of relief food was looted from a relief agency store in Shashamane, southern Shewa, in the days after the government fell. The food crises affecting Sudanese refugees in Gambela and refugees and returnees in Harerghe will be examined in chapters 18 and 19.

17. THE RAGE OF NUMBERS: MENGISTU'S SOLDIERS

Outside the areas of armed conflict, the main way in which the wars had a direct impact on the lives of ordinary Ethiopians was through conscription to the army. Throughout the 1980s, in the towns and villages of Ethiopia, the talk was not of defending the nation, but of who had been taken for the army.

After the revolution, the main strategy of the Ethiopian army was sheer force of numbers, in both men and material. Mengistu was obsessed with what the 19th century military strategist von Clausewitz called "the rage of numbers." He built the largest military machine in sub-Saharan Africa.

Numbering about 50,000 at the time of the revolution, the army included about 450,000 regular soldiers and militiamen in early 1991. The majority of these soldiers were conscripts. Many of the methods of conscription violated the basic human rights of the conscripts,¹ and their treatment while in the army also involved many abuses.

Violations included the conscription of boys under the age of 18, in contravention of Ethiopian law, and under 15, in contravention of the internationally-recognized rights of the child. Conscripts were also commonly taken in an arbitrary and violent manner, without warning or the chance of communicating with their families. Once conscripted, the recruits were then subject to ill-treatment.

Conscription, 1976-82

Mass conscription to the Ethiopian armed forces began in 1976, for the "Peasants' March" on Eritrea. In April 1977, the "Call of the Motherland" was issued to raise recruits for the "peasants' militia," to march on the north and Eritrea. In August this militia was diverted to face the Somali army in the Ogaden. In what was to become the normal procedure, each Peasants' Association (PA) or Urban Dwellers' Association (*kebele*) was given a quota of recruits which it had to provide. After the offensives against Somalia and the Eritrean fronts, most of this peasants' militia force was not demobilized, and became in effect part of the regular army.

Over the following years, a variety of measures were used to obtain conscripts. Most of these measures were never formalized, but were implemented by administrative fiat. Possibly the most common was the

¹ For a more detailed analysis of human rights abuses during conscription, see *News from Africa Watch*, June 1, 1990, "Ethiopia: Conscription, Abuses of Human Rights During Recruitment to the Armed Forces."

rounding up of young men in villages and marketplaces in the south, usually during military operations or forced relocations. Conscription to the army was often cited as a reason for flight by refugees from Oromo areas in both southeast and southwest Ethiopia. Others were picked up in ones and twos, mostly in Tigray and north Wollo, usually when they were away from home.

Journalist Dan Connell spoke to some conscript soldiers who had been captured by the EPLF:

One middle-aged farmer from Tigray's Enderta district said that a representative of the Derg had demanded five "volunteers" from each village in his region. The appointed head of his Peasant Association had selected him to go. Several others said they had been told they were going to a political rally and would be brought home afterward. One said that peasants who had been resisting the Derg's heavy taxation were told that they would be pardoned if they turned themselves in. Those who did were put in trucks and sent north. A 42-year old peasant from Woldiya in Wollo said that he was walking towards a coffee house in town when he was forced into a police wagon and later transferred to a truck which carried him to the front. Another explained that he had been having his pants mended by a local tailor when he was shanghaied by an army patrol, and stood up to show that all he had to wear was a burlap sack around his waist, because he had not been allowed to wait for his pants.²

National Service

In 1981, the government announced plans for the organization of the "entire working people into a national military service and civil defense."³ This was formalized by the National Military Service Proclamation of May 1983,⁴ which provided for the conscription of all men aged between 18 and 30. On reaching the age of 16, all young men were to register with their PA or *kebele* for "pre-induction training" prior to national service at age 18.⁵ Then they were to undertake six months' military training

² Dan Connell, "Repression as a Way of Life," *Horn of Africa*, 3.2, (1980) p. 15.

³ Mengistu Haile Mariam, May Day address, May 1, 1981.

⁴ Decree no. 236 of 1983, May 4, 1983.

⁵ The pre-induction training appears never to have been implemented.

followed by two years' service in the armed forces, remaining on reserve until age 50. The Proclamation also specified the duty to remain in service, even after the end of the normal period, in times of mobilization and war.

The conscripts served either in the regular army or in the civil defense units, generally known as "people's militia." The people's militia were enlisted to serve in their home areas and did not generally have combat duties, except for those in Eritrea. Eight new training camps were built for the national servicemen, with Soviet and Libyan help.

Regular rounds of conscription occurred after 1983. Official figures for the numbers of conscripts were never published, but reliable estimates have been made. The first campaign was carried out between January and April 1984. Its target was 60,000 men but it is likely that only 50,000 were actually conscripted. After these recruits completed their six months' training, a second batch of the same size was recruited in January 1985. The third batch, starting in December 1985, had a target of 120,000. Subsequent campaigns usually had targets of 60,000–80,000 recruits. The fourth campaign was recruited between November 1986 and January 1987; the fifth between November 1987 and January 1988.

Following the EPLF victory at Afabet in March 1988 and later rebel successes, conscription intensified. A sixth round was implemented immediately, under the slogan "everything to the warfront." A large part of this campaign was the re-mobilization of men who had served in the first and second national military service intakes of 1984–5, and who remained on reserve. In practice the re-conscription net was thrown wider, and ex-servicemen from other intakes were also taken. Servicemen due for demobilization also had their length of service extended indefinitely. Financial contributions for the war were also solicited from the general public -- one month's pay was deducted from the salaries of public sector employees, and new levies were raised from the peasants.

Following the TPLF capture of Tigray in February 1989, there was yet another round. In the by-now familiar code for the launching of a conscription campaign, Ethiopian radio announced that on March 26 each of the 284 *kebeles* in Addis Ababa held a meeting "on the possibility of translating into deeds the slogan 'Let Everyone be Vigilant to Safeguard the Homeland'... [and] the residents reiterated that they would contribute their share - from preparing provisions to strengthening the revolutionary army, falling at the front and other spheres."⁶

The first batch of national servicemen was demobilized on schedule in November 1986. The second batch was also demobilized. Both these

⁶ BBC, *Summary of World Broadcasts (SWB)*, ME 0420, March 29, 1989.

intakes were called upon to remobilize in April 1988. The third batch, due for demobilization in July 1988, was never demobilized, which was also the fate of subsequent intakes.

Following the TPLF advance in Wollo province in September 1989, another round of conscription -- at least the eighth since 1983 -- was begun. This was intensified in November following further military disasters. In a speech on October 31, President Mengistu said:

The main strategy for defending our country is the proper strengthening of our revolutionary army with manpower and material so that it can meet its obligations. There should be a vast popular participation which must be well-coordinated and mobilized for the decisive victory ... In defending ourselves against the danger foisted on us and overcoming it, manpower is the decisive factor.⁷

This speech heralded one of the largest and most brutal rounds of conscription. A national campaign center was set up on November 10, headed by Vice-President Fisaha Desta. Two days later each of the *kebeles* in Addis Ababa held a meeting to nominate a committee of people who would be mandated to find the required quota of conscripts. Conscription carried on through November and December. Ethiopian radio carried regular reports of "many thousands of volunteers" arriving at training camps, singing patriotic songs and expressing their eagerness to go to the front for the "decisive victory" against the "anti-unity, anti-revolutionary, anti-people bandit gangs." There was a lull in the New Year, but after the EPLF capture of the port of Massawa in February 1990, conscription restarted, especially in the rural areas. All other social and economic programs were made to take second priority to the strengthening of the armed forces. Over 100,000 conscripts were taken in the year to June 1990.

Worse was to come. In his 1990 May Day address, President Mengistu called upon the people to make sacrifices for the government, saying "I do not think the people should expect miracles from the limited number of patriots, revolutionary army, and few militias in the vanguard."⁸ In June, the National Shengo (assembly) called for "non-stop recruitment" to the armed forces to be undertaken urgently. This included the mobilization of retired army and police personnel to serve in the armed forces, and the encouragement of civilians in the war zones to engage in

⁷ BBC, *SWB*, ME 0602, November 1, 1989.

⁸ BBC, *SWB*, ME 0754, May 3, 1990.

guerrilla warfare against the insurgents. In addition, all citizens were urged to make financial contributions to the war effort. Above all, it meant the constant threat of press-ganging, with no "safe" periods between discrete campaigns.

The stepped-up mobilization included veterans, taken to mean anyone who had prior experience in the army or other uniformed services. In 1991 it was expanded to include secondary school and university students. All Ethiopia's institutions of higher education were closed and the students were made subject to conscription. Students at Addis Ababa university were required to register for military service, under the implicit threat of having their education terminated if they refused. With the university closed, many students (particularly those without relatives in Addis Ababa) were also left without means of support, and had little alternative but to join the army. Apparently no other punitive measures were used, and some students were sufficiently fired by the patriotic call to arms made by the government to have readily volunteered to fight. The great majority -- over 80 per cent -- are estimated to have registered. Of these, about one quarter actually went for military training. The others, realizing the harsh conditions and dangers they would face at the front, and under pressure from parents and friends, mostly went into hiding. Outside Addis Ababa, most students were simply rounded up and taken off to training camps.

Addressing the nation on April 19, 1991, President Mengistu called for an even greater mobilization to defeat the insurgents, and called for an army equal to that of Iraq -- i.e. one million men. Subsequently, the Shengo called for "mobilization more than ever before" and authorized the recruitment of *all* able-bodied adult males, using all means available. Fortunately, the government had neither the time nor means to implement this ambition, and within six weeks the army had disintegrated.

Conscription of Under-age Children

There were many instances in which children younger even than the *de facto* minimum age of 15 years were conscripted into the army. Journalist Tom Lansner visited EPLF-controlled Eritrea in May-June 1988, and found 50 boys aged under 16 in a prisoner-of-war camp of 1,500 total. One 14-year old, Thebether Sawra, described how he had been taken by three militiamen while playing football in a neighborhood alley the previous January. "I told them I was 14 but they didn't say anything," he said.

Another 14-year old had also been snatched at a football game, and a third had been taken while attending a village meeting in Bale province.⁹

The government consistently denied that it was conscripting under-age children, and failed to respond to protests made by Save the Children.

The army commonly defended the conscription of under-age children on the grounds that these boys served as "aides" in the military camps, as messengers and the like, and did not have combat duties. Even if true – and there is plenty of evidence that they did indeed engage in combat – this would have been no justification. Such so-called "aides" had been abducted and lost their liberty, and were subject to many of the same rigors and dangers of life at the warfront as combat soldiers.

Methods of Conscription

National service was compulsory in principle, but the government lacked the means to implement this. The comprehensive conscription of all young men aged 18 would imply about 350,000 recruits annually; which was beyond the capacity of even the Ethiopian army to absorb. Instead, conscription was selective, using a variety of methods of obtain the required number of young men and boys.

One of the commonest methods of conscription was through the PAs and the urban *kebeles*. Each PA and *kebele* was set a quota of people, which they were to fill by whatever means they chose. This system was notoriously open to abuse by individuals. PA or *kebele* officials rarely conscripted their relatives or friends, and used the conscript quota as a way of settling grudges, obtaining sexual favours from the wives and sisters of those they chose to detain, or – most commonly – soliciting bribes from conscripts' families. Paying these bribes was a heavy burden on the poor. As well as PA and *kebele* officials, others could demand payment.

At the time of conscription, people sold as much as they could – food and animals; they did not have much, as it was a famine-prone, food-deficit area.... The people used the money to pay for bribes to get their sons released. When men and boys were taken as conscripts, they were first of all put in camps, in the area where they were taken, before being given medical examinations. there were two opportunities for families to get their sons released. The first was to pay officials so that the son

⁹ *The Observer*, London, June 5, 1988.

failed the medical examination. The other way was to bribe the military guards who were on at night, to let their sons out.¹⁰

The PA or *kebele* could also nominate other government servants, such as health workers or agricultural extension workers, to be responsible for collecting the quota. The nominated individuals had no choice but to take on this unpopular job. The people's militia were commonly given the task of recruiting, and militiamen themselves were likely to be conscripted if they failed to fill the quota. PAs and *kebeles* also resorted to picking up strangers and vagrants from the streets in order to fill their quotas. On one occasion they conscripted a Nigerian visitor to Ethiopia named Ibrahim Garba.¹¹

The quota system became deeply unpopular with *kebele* officials and party cadres. As a result, other methods of acquiring recruits became common. One such method was based upon workplaces and schools. At its simplest, factories and offices were allocated quotas in a similar manner to *kebeles*. This was common in 1988. During 1989–91, methods became progressively more arbitrary. Many workers in the public sector were simply detained and thereby conscripted. One example was workers in the construction and road-building industries: in November and December 1989, almost all male workers in these industries were either taken for military service by military police who stationed themselves at their workplaces, or hid themselves and did not turn up for work. For a time it was common to see only women workers on building sites. Workers in the private sector were more secure; Ethiopian law requires that the government compensate private-sector employers when their employees are taken for military service.

The conscription of schoolboys followed a similar pattern: policemen loitered near school entrances and detained pupils entering or leaving. Two ninth-grade pupils at the Menelik II Senior Secondary School in Addis Ababa disappeared in these circumstances in September 1989, without the knowledge of their families and friends. They are believed to have been forcibly conscripted. During the following months many pupils only went to school when they could be accompanied there and back by their parents. Others simply stayed away, but any pupil who was absent for 21

¹⁰ Refugee from Wollaita, Shewa, interviewed in Sudan, October 1989.

¹¹ He spoke no Ethiopian languages and could communicate with nobody. He was later captured by the EPLF, who tried to negotiate his release through the Nigerian Embassy in Khartoum. "Shocker from Ethiopia," *Eritrea Information*, 2.10, November 1980.

consecutive days without a doctor's note was automatically expelled. Instances of forcible conscription also occurred at Addis Ababa university. A foreign medical team visiting TPLF-controlled Tigray in 1988 spoke to two university students who had been conscripted and subsequently captured by the TPLF, and conscription on the campus occurred in late 1989, prior to the main attempt to mobilize students in 1991.

Prisoners

Prisoners were very vulnerable to conscription. Africa Watch has interviewed Getachew, who was conscripted in March 1990 after being detained while trying to flee the country. Tedgai, a conscript from south Gonder captured by the TPLF, told a visitor to Tigray in late 1988 that "some soldiers put me in prison for ten days. They told me I could get out if I joined the army, so I agreed."¹² Soldiers, cadres, and *kebele* officials were notorious for detaining people without charge or on trumped-up charges, so that many of those conscripted in this manner had not committed any offense.

Anybody suspected of an offense, however minor, was at risk from conscription. This was especially true if he were caught outside his home area, so that his relatives and friends were not there to petition on his behalf. A visitor to EPLF-controlled Eritrea in 1984 met a prisoner of war who originated from Tigray. He had gone to visit his grandmother in a neighboring village, but had no travel permit from his PA. In his grandmother's village he was detained and conscripted. At the time he was eleven years old.

Press Ganging

An extreme version of forcible conscription is the press gang. This is often known in Amharic as *afesa*, which translated as "sweeping up", and might be termed the "vacuum cleaner" approach to recruitment. A group of armed policemen or party cadres would roam the streets and marketplaces, picking up any individuals or rounding up any groups they come across. Alternatively they would surround an area and force every man and boy to sit down or stand against a wall, using the threat of opening fire; all those considered eligible would then be forced on to a truck and driven away. Young men and boys were conscripted while playing football in alleyways, going to school or market, or attending religious festivals

¹² Gerry McCann, *The Guardian*, London, February 20, 1989.

or football matches. Teenage boys who worked in the informal sector selling cigarettes, matches, and lottery tickets were a particular target. Many of these boys were under age.

Press ganging mostly occurred in rural areas, but was common in Addis Ababa during November and December 1989, April 1990, and from July 1990 until the fall of the government. The following incident of *afesa*, which occurred on April 11, 1990, was described by Giorgis, a businessman:

I left my office at 4.30 in the afternoon, just as the [Mercato] market was beginning to close. There was a commotion in the second-hand clothes section [of the market]. Some civilians were pushing the boys who sell clothes from Dire Dawa, forcing them into one place. There were also five or six policemen there. Suddenly these policemen got out their guns and shouted at the boys to stop [stand still]. Then about ten of the civilians – probably they were security men or [party] cadres – got out guns too. They formed a circle about 20 meters across, enclosing these boys, and shouted at them to sit down. There was a lorry to take the boys away. I couldn't see how many were taken: I had a boy of 14 from the office with me and I was frightened for him – I was even frightened for myself too – so we disappeared from there as soon as we saw the guns.

People were forced to resort to different ruses to escape *afesa*. As people riding in cars were usually safe, employers, friends and relatives with cars would pick up men and boys from school, university or place of work when they heard that there was a danger of *afesa*. If there was an *afesa* in a neighborhood, local women would patrol near the area and warn men and boys to stay away, or give them *gabis* (shawls) to hide under to disguise themselves as women. If all failed, people would search for a hiding place in a nearby house. One student escaped a press gang by hiding in the back room of a local bar; asked why he did not use the adjacent phone booths to telephone for his father to pick him up, the student replied that "I would have been conscripted while standing in the phone booth."

There were numerous instances in which people trying to resist or escape press-ganging were summarily killed by the conscriptors.

Food Aid as an Enticement to Enlist

A variant method of conscription used in drought-stricken rural areas involved the use of food aid. Since the large-scale provision of relief food to Ethiopia in 1984, it was common for the Relief and Rehabilitation

Commission (RRC) to withhold relief food from villages which failed to meet their quotas for conscription. A more dramatic abuse involved enticing rural people to come to towns to receive a distribution of relief food -- and then conscripting the young men.

One of numerous examples of this occurred in Senafe, Eritrea, in January 1990. Senafe was then the most southerly government-controlled outpost in Eritrea, and was surrounded by rural villages controlled by the EPLF. Following the failure of the rains in this area in 1989, international aid donors provided relief food to the RRC, to distribute to people in the drought-affected areas. In early January the RRC began such a distribution at Senafe. On the first day, only women, children and old people came forward from the villages to collect the rations. They were given their food and allowed to return to the villages in safety. Assuming that it was safe, young men came for their rations on the following day. At least 600 were promptly seized by the army for the local people's militia. "A United Nations monitor stood by helplessly ... as soldiers rounded up teenage boys for military service" according to Jane Perlez, correspondent for the *New York Times*.¹³ There are reports that some of those seized were transported to Asmara and released, but visitors to Senafe reported seeing a large new contingent of militiamen drilling just outside the town. Africa Watch believes that many of the men seized on this occasion were forced into the people's militia.

Similarly, punitive measures were often taken against villages which failed to provide conscripts, or against the families of conscripts who had escaped. These included detention, beating, and the confiscation of assets such as livestock.

Conscription of Women

There was no systematic attempt to conscript women into the armed forces, though members of the government referred with admiration to historical military campaigns in which women participated. PAs, *kebeles*, and press gangs did not usually take any women conscripts.

However, there was *de facto* conscription of women. Women who lived in a town with a large army garrison were at risk from the attentions of the soldiers. Frequently they were harassed and raped. Many women in garrison towns had no means of livelihood other than becoming the

¹³ *New York Times*, February 15, 1990.

concubines of army officers or prostitutes for the common soldiers.¹⁴ Yomar, a woman from the Tigrayan town of Enda Selassie reported:

[the soldiers] did what they liked. They took the girls by force, even married women. If you refused they would take out their pistol. They would arrest your brother, and when you went to visit him in prison they would ask you to sleep with them. In order to get your brother released or to stop his murder you had to choose whether or not to give your body.¹⁵

The repeated rape and other abuse of women is a serious violation of human rights. What made these abuses into a form of conscription is that, when the soldiers in question were transferred, they sometimes insisted on taking "their" women with them. These women were not only denied their liberty, and exploited sexually and economically, but were subject to many of the same dangers as the soldiers, including shelling, bombardment, and capture.

In 1983, there were several hundred women attached to the army garrison at Tessenei, Eritrea. These women had been recruited from 1978 onwards, ostensibly as "aides" to the soldiers, to cook, sweep, and wash clothes for them. In fact their main purpose was as sexual servants. They were not volunteers. While some had come with army units as they were posted to the town, others had been specially flown in by military airplanes. Most came from Tigray and Shewa. When the garrison was captured by the EPLF in January 1984, the women and their growing band of children were left behind, and their quarter of the town was bombed by government airplanes. In 1984, at the small front-line army outpost of Mersa Teklai on the Red Sea coast, there were five involuntary female "aides" serving the soldiers. In 1989, Jennie Street, a relief monitor visiting Meqele, the capital of Tigray which had been recently abandoned by the government, reported: "A man told me that the army had forced both his daughters to marry cadres, against their and his will, and that they had been taken to Addis Ababa when the Dergue pulled out. He said many girls had been forcibly taken in this way."

These abuses continued until the fall of the Mengistu government. One example comes from Senbete, in northern Shewa. When an army battalion

¹⁴ Large numbers of single women in the towns of Tigray and north Wollo needed relief aid following their capture by TPLF-EPRDF.

¹⁵ Quoted in: Jenny Hammond, *Sweeter than Honey: Testimonies of Tigrayan Women*. Oxford, 1989, p. 150.

(of 600–800 men) was stationed at Senbete, in early 1990, the local people were forced to provide food for it. Protests that the local villages themselves were short of food, on account of drought, went unheeded. When the battalion left the area, the soldiers rounded up women and forced them to accompany them — ostensibly as cooks and cleaners. Elsewhere in northern Shewa, local women were forced to come and live at army camps to cook food and serve the soldiers, abandoning their families for long periods.

Sufferings of Conscripts' Families

On occasion, conscripts were not allowed to communicate with their families, who therefore had no way of learning of their fate. The scale of conscription was such that more than one in four eligible young men and boys were conscripted into the army and people's militia. Almost every family was affected. Hundreds of thousands of families in Ethiopia had sons who simply disappeared into the armed forces, and they had no way of knowing if they were still serving, killed, captured, or maimed. The Ethiopian government refused to recognize the existence of the tens of thousands of prisoners captured by the rebel fronts.

The psychological effects of this prolonged separation could be devastating for the families. A researcher studying women in Addis Ababa in 1988 found that 94 out of a sample of 113 women were suffering from what they described as "oppression of the soul" — in English, something equivalent to chronic depression — and that 90 of these attributed the cause to the fact that their husbands, brothers or sons were serving in the army, often forcibly conscripted, and usually they had heard no news from them.¹⁶ This depressed psychological state in turn led to neglect of their young children, who as a consequence suffered more from illnesses such as diarrhoea.

Fears of conscription plagued those not directly affected. One Ethiopian woman refugee illustrated some of these worries:

A friend of mine ... delivered a baby boy at that time [1989]. When she was congratulated she said "but I'll only have him for about 12 or 13 years, and then he'll go to Mengistu; if I had a girl, I would have her a bit longer."

¹⁶ Astier M. Almedom, "Aspects of the Health and Growth of the Suckling and Weanling Child in Ethiopia," DPhil thesis, Oxford, 1991, pp. 175–6.

A sociologist working in Manz, northern Shewa, recorded a song which expressed the same sadness:

The mother of a boy,
Tie your stomach with rope,¹⁷
It will be a vulture
And not a relative, who will bury him.

Another song is an ironic comment on government propaganda:

As the ants swarm
The birds fly,
Woe is the child of Manz
He fought for his country.¹⁸

Treatment of Soldiers

Soldiers were provided with poor housing, food, and medical care, and they were subject to arbitrary and often brutal treatment. Training of conscripts was increasingly basic. Africa Watch obtained the following testimony from Getachew, a schoolboy who was forcibly conscripted in March 1990:

We arrived at the training camp in Debre Zeit on March 22. There they shaved our heads were shaved and burned our clothes. There was a medical examination, and two failed. They gave us a green [army] uniform, a blanket, a bedsheet, a plate and a drinking cup. We were sent to sleep in a large store belonging to the Defense Construction Authority which had been turned into a sleeping place for the camp. We slept on plastic grain bags filled with the leaves of eucalyptus trees and Christmas trees. About 2,000 slept in our store, and there were three other stores used for sleeping, which were much bigger. An officer told us that there were 20,000 in the camp. During the first week, thousands arrived every day; then they stopped arriving.

There were people from all over the country; all the same, all conscripted. We were divided into units of 48. Each group was to be

¹⁷ Women bind their stomachs after childbirth to help lose the extra weight.

¹⁸ Helen Pankhurst, "Women, the Peasantry and the State in Ethiopia: A Study from Menz," PhD Thesis, Edinburgh, 1990, p. 77.

commanded by a lieutenant, but we hardly saw any officers in the camp, only trainers. Our group contained boys from Moyale [a district on the Kenyan border]. Many did not speak Amharic and they needed a translator. The youngest was 14. We drilled every morning from 7 to 12, and then in the afternoon from 2 to 5. We did not use guns or sticks, we just drilled. If you were ill they gave you medicine, but if you lagged they would beat you with sticks. We ate *injera* [Ethiopian bread] made from maize and beans: nothing else, the food was bad.

They told us that we were going to be transferred to a second camp where we would learn how to use a gun, but there was a shortage of transport so we were staying for now in the first training camp in Debre Zeit. They said that the previous batch had been 43,000, and that they had stayed 15 days and sent straight to the north [the war front].

The camp was not a proper military camp: it was a place belonging to industry. There was no wall or fence around it, only guards. After one week there I tried to escape with four others, but we were seen and captured. We were lucky; others were shot dead when trying to run away. They beat us with sticks. There was one officer who beat especially hard. I had wounds here [on the left forearm] and here [below the left eye]. But they were not serious in beating us: they beat us near to death but none of us is dead. We were put in a cell made from corrugated iron. It measured 3X4 [meters] and there were 60 people in there: we could not lie down to sleep, we could only sit. Some of the people there had tried to escape -- one had a wound where he had been shot -- and others had done other things wrong. They gave us no [medical] treatment there, but they did later. We were kept there 24 hours, and then sent back to training.

The next Saturday night [April 7/8] I decided to escape -- this time on my own. At midnight it started to rain hard, and the guards went back under their shelters. I crept out on my stomach. This time I got away -- as you see.

After a few weeks of such training, massed columns of conscripted men and boys were thrown against the guns of some of the most hardened guerrilla fighters in the world. Each month, hundreds or thousands were killed, wounded, or captured, often without even firing a shot or seeing their supposed enemy. Many did not even know how to fight. Three teenage boys conscripted into the army and captured by the EPLF at Afabet said:

When the battle began, we didn't know what to do. We asked the officer. He said: "you have a gun, shoot. Do like those in front of you."¹⁹

A 15-year old boy was conscripted by soldiers from his village in August 1989, while herding sheep. After four weeks "training" he was sent to the front at Woldiya (Wollo), where he was captured by the EPRDF in his first engagement. In November, he was interviewed by a visiting relief worker:

One day in the morning I was ordered to quickly jump on a truck and we left the town. We drove for a short time and stopped in an area where there was a lot of shooting going on. Together with the other soldiers from my truck I walked a short distance and then we arrived in a place where I saw lots of troops fighting, running around and laying on the ground. I did not know what to do and asked one of the people who came with me. He told me to go ahead and shoot at people who were wearing a different uniform from mine.

Enforcement of Discipline

Conditions within the Ethiopian army were at best poor and at worst a living nightmare.

Mohamed, a former goldsmith, was conscripted 14 months ago and received four months' training during a lull in the war. He was already a veteran of four battles before his capture. "But it's not the fighting I remember," he said, "just the fear. A man in my old unit tried to desert but he was caught and the officer told one of my comrades to shoot him. He had to -- we all would. Otherwise, we would have been killed."²⁰

Sergeant Bocretsion Kidan Mariam Fecadu, a deserter in Eritrea, gave the following account of how the Ethiopian army treated ordinary soldiers following the failure of the Red Star offensive:

¹⁹ Quoted in a film made by Alter-cine Inc. (Daniele LaCourse and Yvan Patry) *The Forbidden Land*, September 1989.

²⁰ Gerry McCann, "Between Heaven and Hell", *Observer Scotland*, April 16, 1989.

As the troops retreated to their base areas the army authorities decided to make an example of those who were to be blamed for the failure of the offensive. Thirty two people were picked out from the 23rd Division and shot. The authorities also declared that it was an offence for anyone to mention the strength of the EPLF at any time or to criticize the army in any way.

The Dergue's cadres at the base camps also made examples of a number of other individuals who were publicly executed for "crimes against the army." Those executed included:

- * Sergeant Tesfaye Ayena who was shot because he was accused of leaving the battlefield because he was sick.
- * Captain Hailu, who was accused of giving up a water-well to the enemy and leaving his rifle behind when he retreated.
- * Militiaman Eshetu Kebede, accused of running away from the front near Alghena.
- * Tesfaye, who was accused of discussing the EPLF with other soldiers and speaking favourably about them.
- * Kemal Abdu, a private, accused of retreating from the battlefield.

Soldiers were regularly shot, accused of wounding themselves in order to be hospitalized, retreating in the face of the enemy, or simply "gossiping".

The general conditions in the army were also bad. Soldiers' pay was regularly withheld and they were told it was sent to their parents or wives, when in fact, those people never received a birr from the authorities. Those who reported sick were often refused treatment on the grounds that they were already suffering from heart troubles, eye defects and other illnesses before they joined the army and it was not, therefore, the army's responsibility to give them medical treatment. Even letters from soldiers' families were either held back or were opened and kept from the intended recipients for long periods of time, leaving the families without a reply and uncertain as to whether their sons or husbands were still alive.

All these problems, together with the constant fear of being shot for some real or imagined offence, created a very insecure atmosphere in the army and many people became so desperate that they decided to desert at the first opportunity. A number of people even committed suicide rather than face the continuous strain of fighting and reprisals from the army.²¹

Sgt. Bocreision himself saw three men -- Corporal Teshome, Private Misgame Fantaw and a militiaman whose name he did not know -- shoot themselves.

Senior officers were regularly executed after the failure of offensives or for expressing the opinion that the war was unwinnable. There were executions in Eritrea in June 1982 and February 1988, and in Addis Ababa in May 1990 (see below).

Within the army there was a tight security network:

There are officers throughout the army who are called "welfare officers", but who are in fact secret service personnel. These ones are relatively safe because you know who they are, but there are other secret service people who operate clandestinely, and their presence creates a lack of trust amongst soldiers. These people are extremely powerful and they set up a sort of information network. Any punishment or action that is taken doesn't just arise by itself, but is the result of this spy network. On the field discipline is sometimes brutally enforced. There are stories of infantry going into battle with lines of machine guns behind them.²²

During the 1980s there were numerous stories, mostly unsubstantiated, of firefights between army units and of special units deployed to gun down soldiers who tried to retreat. Flight-Lt Habte Luel, a helicopter pilot who defected to Sudan in August 1987, claimed that he had done so after disobeying an order to fire on retreating troops. One substantiated incident occurred at Bahir Dar, Gojjam in March 1990. The army garrison blew up one span of the bridge across the Blue Nile, in order to prevent EPRDF forces crossing it. The bridge was blown up while retreating government soldiers were still on it, killing an unknown number.

Another incident occurred in early 1991, when the army in Eritrea tried to deploy militia forces as front line troops at Ghinda, north of Asmara.

²¹ *Somali, Tigray and Oromo Resistance Monitor (STORM)*, 3.2, June 1983.

²² Lieutenant Yamani Hassan, a prisoner of war held by the TPLF, interviewed by Gerry McCann and Sarah Vaughan at Tade Azregar, Tigray, December 1, 1988.

This led to friction, as the militiamen felt that the contract governing their deployment had been violated. The results were a spate of desertions from the militia in Eritrea and the refusal of some battalions to be transferred from their home areas. The army responded by confiscating all the property of deserting militiamen and burning their houses, detaining others, and threatening summary execution for any caught while attempting to desert. The families of militiamen who deserted were subject to reprisals, including detention. While looting, burning and detention certainly took place, Africa Watch is unable to confirm any incidents of summary execution.

A serious incident occurred in early February 1991, when a militia unit that originated from Qohayn in Seraye withdrew from the Ghinda front towards Asmara. The unit was met by a force from the regular army at a place between Mai Haber and Adi Hawesha, and a firefight ensued. According to reports, casualties ran into the hundreds. The divisional officer of Seraye, Ghezay Sebhathu, was killed in the fighting. The militia were defeated, and over 300 were detained in a railway tunnel, without even the most basic facilities, and lacking fresh air. They were later transferred to the military training camp at Adi Nefas, near Asmara, where an unknown number remained in detention until the fall of Asmara in May.

The Attempted Coup of April 1989

On May 16, 1989 a group of senior officers attempted to stage a coup d'etat in Addis Ababa, while President Mengistu was out of the country on a visit to East Germany. The stated aims of the plotters included a negotiated end to the wars and political and economic liberalization. President Mengistu's intelligence had learned in advance of the planned coup, and his security forces struck first, precipitating an attempt by the plotters to seize power before they were fully prepared.²³ Two generals were killed in a shoot out with security forces sent to arrest them by the loyal Minister for Internal Affairs, Tesfaye Wolde Selassie. The mutineers took control of the army and air force headquarters and the defense ministry; all were besieged by loyalist troops. There was fighting at all three locations before the coup plotters surrendered. The Minister of Defense, Maj-Gen Haile Giorgis Habte Mariam, was killed by the plotters, reportedly for telling them to surrender. The security forces also made a sweep through the city, arresting several hundred suspected sympathizers with the coup. In total 44 officers were reported killed.

²³ *Africa Confidential*, 30.11, May 26, 1989.

The commanders of the garrison in Asmara mutinied simultaneously but were also overpowered.

After the coup had been crushed on May 18, 176 army officers were detained. The former Commander in Chief of the Air Force, Maj-Gen Fanta Belay, disappeared and is believed to have been executed. In December, 13 generals and one navy commander were brought to trial before the military division of the Supreme Court. The fact that they were tried rather than summarily executed appeared to indicate that Mengistu was prepared to grant them clemency, which would have been well-received in the army, the general population and the international community. However, in a surprise announcement on May 21, 1990, the government radio stated that 12 of the defendants had been found guilty and executed the previous Saturday night in the basement of the Presidential Palace. The generals were given no chance to appeal against the sentences, which were carried out immediately.

The news of the executions and the speed of their implementation came as a shock to many Ethiopians, and contributed to student unrest at the university of Addis Ababa over the following week. In the longer term, the executions also contributed to the demoralization of the armed forces.

Prisoners of War

Many soldiers were captured by the rebel fronts and (in 1977/8) the Somali army. There are reliable reports that the WSLF and Somali army regularly killed prisoners of war. Treatment of prisoners by the OLF has not been properly documented. The largest number of prisoners was taken by the EPLF and TPLF-EPRDF, and these were well treated. Captured soldiers had their weapons and their boots confiscated and were then taken to prisoner-of-war camps.

At different times in the war, the EPLF and TPLF-EPRDF held thousands or tens of thousands of prisoners. In late 1989, the EPRDF claimed to have 37,000. Their living conditions were basic, with meager but adequate food and accommodation -- but in this respect they lived little differently from the local population or indeed the members of the rebel fronts. Blankets, clothes, soap and cigarettes were supplied when available, but rarely footwear. Medical care was provided: in late 1988, there were 4,000 wounded prisoners receiving some treatment by the TPLF,

including 1,200 cared for in field hospitals.²⁴ There are no reports of physical abuse or execution. The prisoners were sometimes able to correspond with their families. Prisoners were used for manual labor on road construction and other infrastructural projects, but the work was not excessive and discipline was not enforced in a humiliating manner. Some were given training in literacy and nursing. Other social and recreational activities -- notably soccer matches -- were organized by the prisoners of war themselves.

In its first congress in January 1977, the EPLF committed itself to respecting the Geneva Conventions with respect to the rights of prisoners of war.²⁵ The TPLF made a similar promise. However, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was unable properly to fulfill its mandate with regard to the prisoners. Details about the disagreements between the fronts and the ICRC are not public. However, it appears that the EPLF and ICRC were unable to agree on the circumstances in which the ICRC could interview prisoners. Relations between the TPLF and the ICRC were warmer, and some discreet assistance was reportedly provided to prisoners in Tigray, but soured in late 1987 when the ICRC withdrew from the cross-border relief operation.

Prisoner of war camps were attacked by air force bombers on several occasions. As the locations of the main camps were well-known to the government, this must have been deliberate. Orota camp in Eritrea was attacked several times. In Tigray, ten prisoners of war were killed and 20 injured in an air raid on June 28, 1989, and in November 1989 air force planes bombed a wood outside Adwa the morning after a contingent of 3,000 prisoners of war had left it.

The Ethiopian government consistently refused to recognize the existence of prisoners of war held by the EPLF and TPLF. This led to dangers when prisoners tried to communicate with their families and when they tried to return home after having been released. This was an important factor impeding ICRC efforts to carry out its mandate; it could not assist prisoners to correspond with their families, nor initiate or monitor prisoner releases and exchanges.

²⁴ Health Action Group, "Report on a Recent Visit by Medical Team to Western Tigray," London, 1988; Health Action Group and REST UK Support Committee, "Report on the Emergency Health Care Project, July 1988-January 1989," London, 1989.

²⁵ The Geneva Conventions apply to international armed conflicts, but also set forth the humanitarian principles that are relevant to internal conflicts.

The EPLF released prisoners of war on the occasions when it was unable to provide for their sustenance or safety, or as goodwill gestures. Releases occurred at regular intervals from the late 1970s onwards. Many prisoners were however kept for extended periods. The TPLF did not keep rank-and-file prisoners for longer than a year at most. After a six month period in which the prisoners were introduced to the aims of the TPLF, prisoners of war were given the choice of trying to return home, remaining in the TPLF-held area, going to Sudan as a refugee, or joining the TPLF (or, after 1989, the EPRDF). There are no documented cases of significant variations in this practice.

The Somali army captured about 10,000 prisoners of war between July and October 1977. There were no central directives concerning their treatment, which depended entirely on the inclination of the commanding officer who captured them: some were well-treated and sent to prisoner of war camps, others were abused and even executed. In October 1977, the Somali Ministry of Defense reportedly issued an instruction to all commanders that there were to be no more prisoners. Thereafter, many were routinely shot on capture, while officers who refused to do this passed their prisoners to senior officers who would deal with them according to their preference. Thousands were certainly summarily executed; fortunately the order was given after the Somali army had made its main military gains. The WSLF treated prisoners of war in the same manner.

The government regarded all ex-prisoners of war as deserters, who were liable to be imprisoned, executed, or re-conscripted. There were "re-education" schools for released prisoners of war in Gonder and Meqele, in which they were detained for varying periods of time, and subjected to physical abuse and torture. Some were killed.²⁶ Many were re-conscripted into the army. In later battles some of these ex-prisoners were recaptured. Some soldiers captured by the fronts had been conscripted, captured, and released as many as three times.

The government treatment of captured rebel fighters and Somali soldiers was poor. Many were subjected to torture and prolonged imprisonment, and some were killed. They were denied the amenities and rights granted to prisoners of war held by the fronts.

²⁶ An unconfirmed claim by the EPLF is that 75 prisoners of war who had been militiamen were killed while passing through towns after their release in early 1979. Another claim is that five were killed in Maichew, Tigray on December 13, 1988, after having been released by the TPLF.

The Forces of the EPLF

The size of the army of the EPLF remained a closely-guarded secret throughout the war. During the early 1970s, the manpower of the ELF and EPLF certainly outnumbered the Ethiopian army in Eritrea, but after 1978 the position was reversed, with the build-up of the army and the collapse of the ELF. Common estimates of the size of the EPLF were 12,000-18,000 in 1982, rising by 1989 to 40,000-50,000, plus 30,000 militia.²⁷ Both the EPLF and the Ethiopian government however had reasons to underestimate the numerical strength of the front's forces, so the real figures are likely to be somewhat higher.

The majority of the fighters in the EPLF were undoubtedly volunteers. Many young men fled from the conscription operated by the Ethiopian government and instead joined the EPLF.

Throughout the 1980s, the EPLF operated a draft to fill the remainder of its ranks. The principle and the implementation varied from place to place, but essentially it consisted of a quota of conscripts levied on all Eritrean communities inside Eritrea, and occasionally was extended to refugee camps in Sudan. According to the testimony of refugees in Sudan, each community was left to decide how to fill its quota, but on occasions the EPLF would itself choose whom to take if no conscripts were delivered. The draft was imposed together with the provision of services such as education. Women were encouraged to join the front as well. There are no confirmed reports of the conscription of under-age children.

A number of refugees fled to Sudan to avoid being conscripted, or having their sons or daughters conscripted. Many Eritreans from the western district of Barka are conservative Moslems, and often a family's reason for flight was not opposition to the draft itself, but fear of the secularizing and modernizing influence that membership in the EPLF would exert on the conscripted son or (especially) daughter. (Conversely, escaping from such a family environment was one reason why some young women volunteered to join the EPLF.)

One significant incident of local resistance to EPLF conscription occurred at Asela in the Danakil district of eastern Eritrea. The people of this area are Afar, and all are Moslems. The EPLF had occupied the area more-or-less continually since 1978, and had supported a militia drawn from the local Afar. In September 1988, the EPLF tried to conscript a contingent of the people to its regular forces. The people of Asela objected to the

²⁷ NOVIB, "War and Famine in Ethiopia and Eritrea: An Investigation into the Arms Deliveries to the Struggling Parties in Eritrea and Tigray," Zeist, the Netherlands, 1991, p. 12.

requirement that the conscripts move to Sahel district for training, rather than remaining in the Danakil. This followed some earlier incidents in which the local people had objected to the EPLF requiring women to attend political education classes. The conscription dispute led to an armed clash between the Afar militia and the EPLF. According to reports, an EPLF unit opened fire and caused about 20 casualties among the Afar men resisting conscription. The Afar themselves had ready access to arms, and a battle ensued. Afar community leaders "officially" claimed that there were 300 Afar fatalities,²⁸ but in fact the total number of casualties is unlikely to have exceeded 250 dead and wounded. Further clashes occurred in February and May 1989.

The Forces of the TPLF-EPRDF

The fighting strength of the TPLF and latterly the EPRDF was an even more closely-guarded secret than that of the EPLF. The most common estimates put their strength at 5,000-7,500 between 1980 and 1985, rising to 30,000 by 1989 and 70,000 by 1991.²⁹ No estimate for militiamen has been made. However, these figures are likely to be underestimates. In 1980, the TPLF began to arm village militias throughout Tigray. Noting that by the mid-1980s every village had a part-time militia which included a substantial number of the adult men, and recognizing that the population of Tigray is closer to four million than two million, this implies a very considerable reserve strength of well over 100,000.

The TPLF-EPRDF never had a problem with recruits. If anything, the problem was the reverse -- there was too much popular demand to join its ranks, or at least receive arms from it to form a militia. There is a deep attachment to armaments in the Ethiopian highlands, which has long been heavily militarized. One of the reprisals that was most resented by the population of eastern Tigray after the suppression of the *Weyane* revolt of 1943 was the confiscation of firearms from the people. Traditional culture extols warlike values, and the possession of a rifle is seen as a mark of prestige. The TPLF built upon this entrenched tradition, composing and popularizing its own songs which vaunted the importance of joining the armed struggle. To be a TPLF fighter was to achieve a heightened social status. Young men were thus under considerable social and

²⁸ As reported in *Africa Confidential*, August 25, 1989.

²⁹ NOVIB, 1991, p. 12.

psychological pressure to join. Many volunteered, and the TPLF was therefore able to screen would-be recruits and select only the most suitable.

Similar attitudes greeted the EPRDF during its advance southward. On occupying southern Wollo in late 1989, the EPRDF was confronted with large demonstrations of peasant farmers demanding to be armed. On moving in to Gojjam in February–March 1991, the EPRDF was immediately met with a demand that the local militia (which had been partly disarmed by the government in mid-1990 on account of participation in local revolts in April 1990) be given back their weapons — the EPRDF complied. Many government soldiers and militiamen who were captured by the EPRDF either immediately volunteered to fight against their erstwhile colleagues, or decided to do so after a brief spell of captivity. There is no evidence that coercion was used to make prisoners of war join the front.

The TPLF–EPRDF official requirements for fighters include a lower age limit of 18 years. Some fighters interviewed by journalists in Addis Ababa in May–June 1991 certainly looked younger than that age, and some admitted to being in their mid-teens.

Once a fighter was in the TPLF–EPRDF, discipline was strictly enforced, and there was no method of leaving except through injury. There are reliable accounts of members of the TPLF wanting either to leave active service, or to leave the organization altogether, and being prevented. The EPRDF has indicated that this policy will change now that the war has been won.

More generally, the TPLF–EPRDF has further entrenched a popular culture that centers on firearms and fighters. The TPLF–EPRDF ideology stresses that a health worker, relief worker or local administrator is also a "fighter" in the "people's struggle." It also stresses that war in general is an evil, but that the war against the Dergue was a necessary evil and therefore good. It is questionable, however, the extent to which these higher principles have been understood by the population at large, or even whether, outside the TPLF heartlands, a serious attempt was made to inculcate them. A fundamental principle of the TPLF is that "the people, organized, politicized and armed, cannot be ruled against their will."³⁰ The widespread ownership of firearms, many of which are modern automatic weapons, does facilitate popular resistance to central government, but it also creates potential problems for the enforcement of law and order and the implementation of democratically-arrived at decisions.

³⁰ Meles Zenawi, interviewed by Alex de Waal, November 1988.

Other Forces

The forces of the OLF and most other rebel fronts were relatively small in comparison to the EPLF and TPLF-EPRDF. There is little information available about their practices of recruitment or their treatment of fighters. The fact that most of the WSLF fighters in early 1977 were in fact members of the Somali army has been mentioned in chapter 4; the forcible recruitment of Ethiopian refugees to the WSLF, Somali army and possibly the Somali-backed Oromo front will be discussed in chapter 19.

18. WARS WITHIN WARS: THE WESTERN AND SOUTHWESTERN LOWLANDS

Ethiopian provinces spread out from the central highlands like spokes of a wheel. Most provinces consist of a highland area, usually inhabited by Amhara or Oromo, and a lowland hinterland, inhabited by marginalized people who are often semi-nomadic pastoralists. This is particularly the case for the west and the southwest.

West and southwest Ethiopia is the most economically productive and ethnically complex part of the country. Gojjam province is one of the Amhara heartlands, but contains a large peripheral area to the west, inhabited mainly by Agau and Gumuz people. Ethiopia's main export, coffee, is indigenous to the southwest,¹ which is mostly fertile and well-watered. In the nineteenth century, the Oromo states of the Gibe region (straddling modern day Keffa, Wollega, western Shewa and eastern Illubabor) were the most prosperous part of the country, and were the center of the regional trade in coffee, slaves, gold and ivory. Apart from coffee, these commodities originated in the surrounding lowlands, which are inhabited by a variety of people, including Gumuz, Berta, Koma, Mao, Ganza, Anuak, Nuer, Nyangatom, Chai, Dassenatch, Kwegu, Mursi, Ari, Hamar, and others. Many of these ethnic terms overlap, or are used in different ways by different groups, and many ethnic groups have two or more names. In the west of Wollega and Gojjam, these peoples are referred to as "Shankilla" by the highlanders, a derogatory term that they themselves reject. These groups are incorporated into the state to varying degrees -- some may be considered to be subjugated, others are marginal but have maintained a high degree of independence.

The existence of the international frontiers with Sudan and Kenya is a central fact of this area. Many ethnic groups straddle the border. The civil war in southern Sudan and the repression in northern Kenya have often meant that life on the Ethiopian side of the border, where the government has at times shown flexibility in local administrative arrangements, has been preferable to life in the neighboring country.

This chapter will outline the wars and famines that have affected the lowlands of the west and southwest, province by province, from north to south.

¹ The word "coffee" is even said to derive from the name of Keffa province, where the trees grow wild.

Western Gojjam: The EPRP Revisited

The western region of Gojjam is one of the Amhara heartlands, with a traditional independence from Shewa (see chapter 3). The western lowlands of the province, however, are inhabited mainly by peoples who have more in common with their neighbors in lowland Wollega than the highland Amhara. These people include Gumuz, Agau, Shinasha and others. The Gumuz (also known as Begga), who numbered about 53,000 in 1970 will figure most prominently in this account.

Western Gojjam has long been incorporated into the extended domains of the highland states, which have raided for slaves in the area. In the 19th century, Ras Kassa of Quara became a renowned *shifita* leader in the area, rising to become the Emperor Teodros.

Following its first defeat in Addis Ababa during the Red Terror, and its second defeat in Tigray at the hands of the TPLF in 1978, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) set up a base for guerrilla operations in western Gonder. In 1983, it expanded its operations into northwest Gojjam. The leaders of the EPRP forces were mostly educated Amhara, but the rank and file were drawn from the local people of the area. Growth was slow but steady. In 1984, the EPRP held its second congress in Quara.

From 1985 onwards, the EPRP became more active, particularly in northwest Gojjam. This was partly in response to the resettlement program, which created deep resentment among the local people.

The establishment of the large Metekel settlement complex in late 1984 led to the displacement of the local Gumuz. The Gumuz of this area rely on shifting cultivation and gathering wild foods from the forest. The government declared that any arable land currently uncultivated and forests were "unused," and designated them resettlement areas. According to Dessalegn Rahmato, the established land use system was thereby disrupted: new land could not be cleared for shifting cultivation, and as "the main difference between hunger and a full stomach may depend on forest resources," local famine followed.² Some Gumuz turned to armed resistance; in 1985 and 1986 there were incidents in which settlers were fired on, and some joined the EPRP.

According to the testimonies of resettlers who escaped from Metekel and returned to Tigray, the EPRP harassed the settlements and stole food and other commodities, but gave food assistance to escapees and helped them return home.

² Dessalegn Rahmato, "Settlement and Resettlement in Metekel, Western Ethiopia," *Africa* (Roma), 43, (1988) pp. 14-34.

As elsewhere, the government recruited a militia force from among the resettlers and used it not only to police the resettlement camps, but the local people as well.

In December 1985, the government launched its sixth attack on EPRP positions in western Gojjam and south-west Gonder, deploying about 4,500 troops. By mid-January, the attack had been repulsed, but retreating soldiers burned several villages, including Birawe (December 21) and Arema (January 8, 1986), and summarily executed at least 20 civilians. Two further attacks were launched in each of the following two dry seasons. In 1988-9, activity intensified.

On June 21, 1989, the EPRP attacked a construction project within the Metekel area and kidnapped three Italian workers. Several vehicles and a water point were destroyed in the attack, and (according to escapees) food from a store was taken. The kidnapping incident gained much international publicity and government reprisals were quick to follow.

There is a credible account that on December 20, 1989, government troops entered Ambela market, Ankesha Banja sub-district, and opened fire, killing 14 and wounding 20 marketgoers. In August 1990, the EPRP made military gains, leading to another round of reprisals. These included:

- * August 28: two villages in Ankasha sub-district were shelled, and three civilians killed.
- * October 1 and 2: villages near Dangila were shelled and ten civilians were killed.
- * December: soldiers killed a number of peasants in Laye Zigem, and reportedly then cut the genitals off the male corpses and displayed the mutilated bodies as a deterrent to support for the insurgents.

Conflict between EPRP and EPRDF

During 1990, the military advance of the EPRDF brought it into contact with the EPRP. The wounds from the battles of 1978 had not been healed – if anything, they had intensified due to the fact that the EPDM, a constituent of EPRDF, was originally a breakaway group from EPRP. There were a number of mutual accusations of aggression. When the EPRDF occupied highland Gojjam in February–March 1991, these intensified. The EPRP accused the EPRDF of "declaring war" against it, of detaining EPRP supporters in the towns it occupied, of shooting unarmed demonstrators, and of taking away infrastructure from the resettlement sites. The EPRDF on its side accused the EPRP of aggression, of ambushes and of mining

roads. On April 18, 1991, there was a battle between EPRP and EPRDF following the latter's occupation of Dangila.

Following the fall of the Mengistu government in May, fighting between the EPRP and EPRDF continued in western Gojjam. The Sudan government, which had hitherto given support to the EPRP, withdrew that assistance and closed the border. Four EPRP leaders in Sudan were arrested and handed over to the EPRDF. Intense fighting continued into July, with the EPRP admitting serious losses.

The conflict with the EPRP presented the EPRDF with its first challenge concerning its conduct of warfare in a situation in which it possessed overwhelming superiority in manpower and materiel. At the time of writing it is too early to tell how the EPRDF forces have acquitted themselves in terms of treatment of the civilian population believed to be sympathetic to EPRP, and treatment of EPRP combatants taken prisoner. There have, however, been no reports of such abuses.

Highland Wollega: Lutherans and Oromo Nationalists

In the 1880s, the western Oromo states and Keffa were incorporated into the Shewan empire of the Emperor Menelik. Some were conquered by Menelik's armies, under the command of an Oromo general, Ras Gobana Dacche, and were subjected to the alienation of land and the imposition of *neftegna* Amhara settlers. Others, notably Leka-Nekempte (eastern Wollega) submitted voluntarily, and retained a degree of internal autonomy. The peripheral areas, most of them already subject to Oromo domination, were conquered in the 1890s.

The ethnic heterogeneity of the area and the variety of manners in which the peoples submitted to Abyssinian rule meant that local administration was uniquely intricate and frequently anomalous. As elsewhere in the empire, many conquered people did not submit readily to their new overlords. There were frequent if localized rebellions. The Gibe states had themselves subjugated neighboring peoples, and there were occasional violent clashes between the Oromo and the peripheral groups.

During the Italian occupation, the Oromo leaders of Wollega and Illubabor initiated a movement for independence from Ethiopia, based on the premise that they had voluntarily joined in the 1880s and had not thereby forfeited any sovereign rights, and in 1936 petitioned the British government to secede and become a British protectorate. The attempt was unsuccessful, but Oromo nationalism remained at least as potent in this area as in eastern Ethiopia. Many Oromo from Wollega were active in the Mecha-Tulema Association of the 1960s.

An important element in the growth of Oromo dissidence in the southwest was the Evangelical Church of Ethiopia, known as the Mekane Yesus. This was founded by Lutheran missionaries from Sweden, who were also active in Eritrea. The Imperial government forbade the missionaries to operate in the Amhara highlands, but permitted them to evangelize among the Moslems and followers of traditional religions in the south. Wollega province was where the Mekane Yesus concentrated, and by the 1970s it had a large number of followers and, equally importantly, had provided educational facilities on a scale that outstripped all other provinces save Shewa and Eritrea.

An indigenous protestant church, the Bethel Evangelical Church, was also influential in the growth of Oromo political consciousness. This gained a strong following in the Dembi Dolo area.

Repression and Insurrection 1975–85

The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) was slow to begin military operations in western Ethiopia; it only began small-scale activities in 1981. The conditions were right, however, for resistance to grow. The government had already instigated a series of crackdowns in the area, mainly aimed at the influence of the educated elite associated with the protestant churches.

The military commander of Wollega from 1976 onwards was Sergeant Negussie Fanta, who soon acquired a reputation for ruthlessness. In early 1977, 15 Oromo students were executed for campaigning for the right to an education in Oromo (ironically, the government-sponsored literacy campaign was soon to cede them that right). The period of the Red Terror saw a crackdown on educated Oromo, especially members of the Mekane Yesus. A prominent pastor in the Mekane Yesus, Gudina Tumsa, was imprisoned in June 1979, and later "disappeared." His wife, Tsehai Tolessa, was imprisoned with over 400 other Oromo women in February 1980, and later released. Between May and December 1981, 300 Mekane Yesus churches were closed, and 600 pastors and other church workers arrested and church property confiscated.

In an apparent attempt to enforce a cultural change and a break from the church, people were forced at gunpoint to attend literacy classes and public meetings.³ The government sent students to Wollega with instructions "to make 80 farmers literate;" instruction in the ideals of the revolution was also given.

³ *Somali, Tigray and Oromo Resistance Monitor (STORM)*, 1.4, October 1981.

Lowland Wollega: Multiple Marginalization

The OLF had its natural constituency in the Oromo-inhabited highlands of Wollega. However, when it started military operations, it did so from a base in Sudan, and therefore operated in the lowlands. Most of the lowland people are not Oromo, but Berta, Komo, Gumuz, and others. These peoples were already suffering at the hands of government military and resettlement policies, following a history of destruction at the hands of raiders and conquerors from all directions.

Life on the border consisted of shrewd calculations as to where short-term security could best be had. For example, a substantial part of the Komo crossed the border several times. They originated on the Ethiopian side of the border, but crossed into Sudan earlier this century to escape Oromo raids, when Sudan became safe from Arab slavers.⁴ In the 1960s, many Komo crossed back into Ethiopia in order to escape the forced labor demands of Sudanese military outposts. In 1966, a Sudanese army unit, annoyed at the departure of its servile labor force, crossed the border, burned several of the villages newly built by the Komo, killed animals and took several hundred people back to Sudan. The villages were also raided by Nuer groups associated with the Anyanya insurrection in southern Sudan. The Komo who remained protested to the Ethiopian authorities, who gave them arms and set up a police post, together with flag poles and flags so that they could advertise whose protection they came under.

The Ethiopian government also brought in highland settlers to secure the border. Started under Haile Selassie, this was intensified under the Dergue.

In 1979, resettlement camps were created at Asosa, close to the Sudan border, with about 25,000 resettlers. These involved alienation of land from local residents, and many of the settlers were armed. Locals were also forced to work without pay on the resettlement projects. This was also one of the few areas in which agricultural collectivization was enforced. Forcible conscription to the army was implemented on a large scale. In early 1981, nearly 10,000 refugees, mainly Oromo, fled to Sudan to escape these abuses. This coincided with famine in western Wollega. Despite good climatic conditions, government policies had induced a severe localized food shortage, affecting an estimated 30,000–40,000 people in western Wollega. The OLF estimates that one thousand died.

⁴ This section is derived from: Wendy James, "From Aboriginal to Frontier Society in Western Ethiopia," in D. Donham and W. James (eds.) "Working Papers on Society and History in Imperial Ethiopia: The Southern Periphery from the 1880s to 1974," Cambridge, African Studies Centre, 1980, pp. 49–50.

In the late 1970s, the Beni Shangul Liberation Front was active in the lowlands, engaging in guerrilla activity on a small scale. During the 1980s it had no effective presence in the field.⁵

Early OLF Activity and Army Reprisals

The first OLF cadres arrived in Wollega in 1981 from eastern Ethiopia, and began to recruit.

Military activity by the Ethiopian army on the "western front" began with an offensive in January–February 1982. Counter–insurgency activities quickly intensified, and a year later a major military camp was constructed in the Didessa valley. Both routine patrols and larger campaigns were conducted with the indiscriminate violence against civilians that is so familiar from elsewhere in the country. During 1983–5, the OLF benefitted from the offensive stance towards Ethiopia taken by the Sudan government.

In August 1984, according to credible reports, army reprisals in Begi area killed over 200 civilians and destroyed numerous homes.⁶ Another army campaign in western Wollega during November–December 1984 led to the burning of villages and the killing of civilians. The largest offensive took place in June 1985 and was centered on Asosa. This followed an intensification of OLF activity, and a joint statement by the OLF and TPLF that they planned to coordinate their attacks and ultimately open a joint military front. Reports indicate that the army used scorched earth policies. The OLF accused it of burning villages and other revenge atrocities.⁷ This offensive coincided with the planting season and contributed to local famine conditions.

In the period 1985–8, the counter–insurgency operations in Wollega were closely related to the implementation of the resettlement and villagization programs, to which attention must now turn.

⁵ In 1989 the EPRDF trained some Beni Shangul Liberation Front fighters, who re–entered the area in early 1991. They clashed with the OLF and were defeated near Shirkele, northwest Wollega, in early March, whereafter they came to an agreement with the OLF.

⁶ *Africa Contemporary Record*, 1984–5, p. B244.

⁷ *Africa Contemporary Record*, 1985–6, p. B296.

Impact of Resettlement

The first major resettlement program in the west was implemented in Asosa, starting in the late 1970s. The settlers were brought from Wollo and Gojjam; many were given military training. The local people were compelled to give land to the settlers, and to supply free labor for the construction of the resettlement sites. The settler militia were reportedly used to exact taxes from the locals and obtain conscripts for the army.

The much larger resettlement program of 1984–8 had comparable consequences for the local population, on a larger scale. In "integrated settlements," the settlers were mixed in with local people, who were obliged to share their land and other resources with the newcomers. The larger "conventional" settlements involved the displacement of indigenous people and the disruption of existing systems for land use, reducing many to a state of hunger and destitution.

Investigations by Cultural Survival indicate that the impact of the resettlement program of 1984–6 on the indigenous population of western Wollega was disastrous.⁸ According to the testimony of refugees in Sudan, local people lost land to the settlers, and were forced to undertake large amounts of unpaid and coerced work constructing the resettlement sites and accompanying infrastructure. The loss of forests and forest resources to the settlements was also disliked. These reports have to be set against more positive descriptions from central and southern Wollega, which report much less tension between settlers and locals.⁹

Based upon the existence of the settlement militia and other considerations, the OLF declared that "the settlement program is a legitimate military target."¹⁰ It attacked settlements on several occasions, for example the settlement of Jarso on April 28, 1988, when two Irish relief workers were captured.¹¹

⁸ Cultural Survival, *Politics and the Ethiopian Famine 1984–1985*, Cambridge, Mass., 1985; Sandra Steingraber, "Resettlement in 1986–1987", in J. W. Clay, S. Steingraber and P. Niggli, *The Spoils of Famine: Ethiopian Famine Policy and Peasant Agriculture*, Cambridge, Mass., 1988.

⁹ Alula Pankhurst, "Settling for a New World: People and the State in an Ethiopian Resettlement Village," PhD thesis, Manchester, 1990.

¹⁰ OLF, "Statement to Agencies Working in Oromo Land," May 4, 1988.

¹¹ The two were released unharmed in Sudan a month later.

Villagization

Villagization began in Wollega in late 1985, and was implemented in the adjoining provinces starting the following year. The program was linked to the construction of roads, and relocation near army garrisons. The program in western Wollega was implemented with thoroughness and coercion, though the level of violence did not match that of Harerghe.¹² All the villagers' possessions were registered, and many were confiscated, including plow oxen. People were detained, tortured, raped and executed; houses and grain stores were burned.

Western Wollega was unusual in that villagization was also accompanied by enforced collectivization; on the collective farms the produce was entirely taken by government officials, and the villagers were instead given a ration.

Outside the insurgent zones of western Wollega and Illubabor (see below), the villagization campaign in southwest Ethiopia was more akin to that in Arsi -- implemented with an implicit threat of violence, but with little actual force used.

The Role of the SPLA

The Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) was set up in 1983 following a mutiny by southern Sudanese soldiers in the town of Bor. From the beginning it was led by Colonel John Garang. Political marginalization and economic exploitation of the south and increasing human rights abuses by the Sudan government were all factors contributing to the mutiny and the subsequent rapid spread of the revolt throughout much of southern Sudan. The SPLA turned to the Ethiopian government as a natural ally in its struggle, and Col. Mengistu for his part saw Col. Garang's movement as a useful counterweight to Khartoum's continuing support for the EPLF, TPLF, OLF and other smaller fronts.¹³ Close links were quickly established between the SPLA and the Ethiopian government at the highest level. The Ethiopian government provided the SPLA with military equipment, bases and a radio station.

Until the fall of the Mengistu government in May 1991, there was close military and security coordination between the SPLA and the Ethiopian army. The Ethiopian army assisted the SPLA in attacks on Kurmuk in

¹² Sandra Steingraber, "Villagization in a War Zone: Refugee Reports from Western Wollega," in Clay *et al.*, 1988, pp. 200-213.

¹³ In the late 1970s and early 1980s, mutineers in southern Sudan had sought and obtained refuge and sometimes support from the Ethiopian government.

Blue Nile Province (across the border from Asosa) in November 1987 and November 1989, and in Eastern Equatoria Province in early 1988. The Ethiopian army also allowed the SPLA freedom to operate in several areas of western Wollega and Illubabor. From 1986–90, the SPLA had a military base at Duul, just inside Ethiopia opposite the Sudanese army garrison at Kurmuk. Local administrators and senior civilian politicians reportedly objected to the SPLA presence, but were overruled by the military command. For its part, the SPLA fought against the OLF. This occurred right up until May 1991, when SPLA contingents fought alongside the Ethiopian army at Dembi Dolo, near Gambela.¹⁴

The SPLA presence in Wollega Ethiopia led to a number of abuses. The enslavement of escaping resettlers has been discussed in chapter 12. Cattle raiding in Keffa and Gamu Gofa will be discussed below.¹⁵ It attacked Oromo refugees and displaced people in August 1987 and November 1988, killing several civilians on each occasion.¹⁶

On November 9, 1989, the SPLA attacked a refugee camp at Yabus in Blue Nile Province, Sudan, and burned it to the ground. Fortunately, the 10,000 refugees had evacuated the camp when they learned of the likelihood of the attack, but were forced to spend many days in the wild without supplies. Yabus camp lay in an area contested between the SPLA and the Sudanese army, and relief items had been regularly brought to the camp with OLF and Sudanese army military escorts. It is therefore understandable that the SPLA might have suspected that it also performed a military or intelligence function.

Perhaps the most common abuse was the requisitioning of supplies and stealing of cattle from the local populations, with accompanying violence against civilians. Simon Mollison, a visitor to Berta areas of western Wollega, controlled by the OLF, in March 1990, described some of the damage caused by SPLA units:

¹⁴ There are two examples of the Sudanese army giving comparable military assistance to rebels in Ethiopia. One was support for the Ethiopian Democratic Union offensive in Gonder in 1977, and the other was the OLF offensive in 1990, described below.

¹⁵ Such raiding was also undertaken by local pastoral groups armed by the Sudan government to fight against the SPLA.

¹⁶ Unconfirmed claims by the OLF are that 37 were killed in the first attack and 19 in the second.

The damage caused by the SPLA was greatest near the Sudanese border and here the ruins of many villages are the only signs of the area having been inhabited. Some of these are now being rebuilt but others are only shown to have existed by the often-singed groups of mango trees in the bush. In villages destroyed more recently, ruined houses still have the charred remnants of human habitation – broken pots, lamps, etc.

Deeper inside [Ethiopia] (50–60km) villages were not destroyed but had been regularly looted by the SPLA. In one village people told how over 1,000 SPLA troops had regularly set up a camp in the village. They would demand food and money from the villagers and strike them. Twelve people had been shot. Even the clothes they were wearing would be taken. Eventually this treatment had impoverished them to the extent that many of them fled to the bush, where they were mainly living on wild foods.... In another village I was told how the SPLA had stolen many of their animals and had burned their grain stores. They had been scared to cultivate in the immediate vicinity of the village.

The OLF offensives of 1990 and 1991 effectively drove the SPLA from the northern and southern parts of western Wollega respectively.

Groups armed by the Sudan Government

The Sudan government employed a very different strategy to its Ethiopian counterpart when faced with insurrection. Instead of using a large and well-equipped conventional army, the Sudan government chose to give arms, support and training to locally-based militia groups, which would then attack the forces of the SPLA with a greater or lesser degree of coordination with the army. This policy started in 1983 and persists up to the present. Some of these militias, such as the *Murahaliin* of southern Darfur and Kordofan regions, have been responsible for some of the grossest abuses of human rights witnessed in modern Africa, including large-scale massacres of civilians, slavery, destruction of villages, and deliberate starvation.¹⁷

Close to the border with Ethiopia, the Sudan government armed several "friendly" groups. These included the Anyanya 2 paramilitary force, mainly drawn from members of the Nuer ethnic group, and Toposa and Murle

¹⁷ See: Africa Watch report, *Denying "The Honor of Living:" Sudan: A Human Rights Disaster*, March 1990.

militias. These groups raided into Ethiopia as well as attacking the SPLA and its sympathizers. One cattle-herding people, the Chai, who live close to the Sudan border, lost almost all their cattle by 1988. Many people were killed, and the remnants of the group was forced to retreat from their existing grazing land to the Maji mountains.

Military Activity in Wollega 1989-91

In November 1989, an SPLA attack across the border from Ethiopia succeeded in capturing the town of Kurmuk. This was the second time that Kurmuk had been taken, and as on the previous occasion two years before, the Sudan government launched a major campaign to recapture it. In the face of superior forces, the SPLA withdrew. There then followed a period of close military cooperation between the Sudanese army and the OLF. In the first days of the new year, the OLF launched a major offensive in western Wollega, with assistance from the EPLF and possibly the Sudanese army, which certainly launched a simultaneous attack on SPLA positions inside Sudan. Within a few weeks, the Ethiopian army and the SPLA had been driven out of their major positions in northwest Wollega, including the strategic town of Asosa. Though a fierce counter-attack followed, and Asosa was recaptured, the OLF gained the ascendancy in the area.

The OLF Capture of Asosa

The OLF capture of Asosa on January 5-10 witnessed a number of abuses against civilians. The first incidents were against the refugees in Tsore camp.

Tsore camp contained about 42,000 Sudanese refugees. The majority had been displaced by fighting in the area in 1987-8, though some were very recent arrivals. About 60 per cent were speakers of the Uduk language.

According to reports, a warning was delivered to the SPLA (by either the OLF or EPLF) that an attack was imminent and that the refugees should be removed from the area for their safety. However, the SPLA failed to effectively pass such a warning on to the residents of Tsore, who learned of the impending attack only when the gunfire came within earshot. Most then collected their possessions, abandoned the camp, and headed southwest towards Yabus Kubri, just across the border in Sudan. According to testimonies later obtained from the refugees, they passed safely among people they identified as "Eritreans," but while travelling through a mountain ravine they were shot at by the Duwalla people, who were armed and instructed by the OLF. An old man and several young girls, some of them

carrying babies on their backs, were killed by being shot and falling into a ravine.

About 120 refugees who did not evacuate the camp were killed in the OLF attack, some of them deliberately.

At Yabus Kubri, the displaced refugees and a contingent of SPLA fighters were bombed by the Sudanese air force. They fled to nearby hill villages. There was then a ground attack on Yabus Kubri by the Sudanese army, which used artillery to shell the hill villages where people were hiding. The people were forced to run southward again, leaving sick people behind on the road. The refugees moved through a succession of places. On the way, they suffered hunger and further aerial bombardment, and heard of threats of more ground attacks by the Sudanese army. Finally the refugees were directed by the SPLA to cross back into Ethiopia, at Pagak, where they arrived in batches between March and June. A representative from UNHCR visited the refugees in their makeshift camp in Pagak and provided some food rations. The camp at Pagak (which is inside Ethiopia) was then bombed, presumably by the Sudan air force. For reasons of cost, UNHCR decided against a new camp at Pagak and instead transferred the refugees to Itang camp between April and July.

The OLF denied that the attack on Tsore camp took place. It did not attempt to justify the attack on the grounds that the camp was also used as a military base, though there is strong evidence that the SPLA utilized all the refugee camps in Ethiopia for military purposes, and the camp occupies a strategic location close to the Kurmuk-Asosa road, where the OLF could not have safely allowed the SPLA to remain. There is also a striking similarity between the attack on Tsore and the destruction of Yabus camp by the SPLA just two months earlier, so a motive of simple reprisal cannot be ruled out.

The OLF also attacked trucks bringing supplies to refugee camps on at least one occasion.

The OLF overran Asosa town and the resettlement camps in the area. Both of these may be counted as military targets -- the town had an army garrison and the resettlement camps (collectively known as *Gojjam Sefer*) contained about 6,000 militiamen who had been used to secure the area and extract taxes, forced labor and conscripts. Both also included substantial civilian and non-combatant populations. In the attacks, there were civilian casualties, and there was at least one incident in which Amharic-speaking civilians were deliberately killed; according to different versions, shot or burned to death.

The Ethiopian government made great propaganda out of the atrocity. Supposed eye-witnesses to the incident were interviewed, who claimed that non-Oromo people were rounded up and instructed to go for a meeting

in a school, where they were machine-gunned. One man claiming to be an eyewitness said that the attackers spoke Tigrinya (the main language of Eritrea and Tigray). Full details of the incidents have never fully come to light.¹⁸

While evacuating, the Ethiopian army burned and looted at least three villages: Shigogoo, near Asosa; Shanto, near Bambesi; and Kongiloo, near Kobar.

The Army and Air Force Counter-Attack

The army responded with a bombing campaign. According to OLF claims, mostly substantiated by independent sources, the following air raids occurred:

- * January 7 and 8: Asosa: nine killed, 15 wounded, including women and children.
- * January 10: Asosa: ten killed, five wounded.
- * January 15: Bambasi, east of Asosa. (For this and the following raids, no casualty figures are available).
- * January 23: Mandi, east of Asosa.
- * January 23: Dalatti, east of Asosa.
- * January 26: Bambasi.
- * January 27: Hopha, north of Asosa.
- * February 7: Hurungu: many houses burned.
- * February 8: Arge: many cattle killed.
- * February 8: Buldugilin, north of Asosa: many houses burned.

This was followed by a ground assault, which took the form of a military action to recover the (now-deserted) town of Asosa, and a series of punitive

¹⁸ In one respect at least, this propaganda backfired: the OLF reported a new influx of recruits from government-controlled areas, who volunteered in order to "kill Amharas."

expeditions in the rural areas. Simon Mollison, visiting western Wollega in March 1990 reported some of the actions of the army and their effects:

Closer to Mandi ... some raids on Berta villages had been carried out by government forces. Such raids appear to have been a recent phenomenon. They have commonly taken the form of government troops entering a village and stealing animals, food, money and possessions from the houses of the people, who had fled at the first sight of the armed force. Those late to leave had been shot at and some had been killed. This happened at the village of Ferdos, for example, a little more than a month ago [mid-February]... They say that at least one man was killed. Houses were broken into and looted but no burning took place.

The village of Sirba, inhabited by the Sese people, was attacked by a government force in January. At least two of the local people were killed and their bodies were tied to trees, but others had time to escape because the attackers were seen while still some distance off. The village was looted and much of it was destroyed. The people have not returned to rebuild the village as they feel it would remain a target. Sirba was the centre of some missionary project and had an airstrip. It can thus be seen as having been quite an important centre for the area. Because of the burning and the method of dealing with the corpses, this raid seems to have been motivated by a desire to punish the villagers.

Harangama is a small village in the hills by the Blue Nile about six hours' walk from Oda. It is a Gumuz village and was attacked by government forces in September 1989. Six people, who were slow escaping, are said to have been killed. The village was burned and most people lost most of their possessions.

I talked with some Oromo people in the lowland bamboo forest about two hours from Ferdos. They told me something of the reason that they had fled their homes to this previously unsettled area.

Government forces had regularly and systematically "raided" their villages. They would take the villagers' money and cattle and also their children (who would be taken to fight in the army). One old man I talked with told me his story. He had arrived to settle in this lowland area two months before [i.e. in January] having finally decided to leave the collective farm, Baamichee, where he had lived for the last eight

years. Previously he had lived in a village called Gumbi where he had been "a rich man". He had owned many cattle and a lot of coffee bushes, he said. His farm in Gumbi was "given to others" (possibly Tigrayans [i.e. resettlers]). Life had got worse and worse in Baamichee. At first it had not been bad but now the government had taken nearly all he produced (maize, luba, peppers, tef). They had taken some of his children and some of his cattle. In the end he was so anxious to escape get away that he left 20 cows behind, taking only two and a little money. He escaped with nine other families and he was the only one who managed to get away with anything. He is now living in this lowland area (they seem to call it Buche) where people would never have dreamed of living once. It is okay in the dry season but not in the rains. The malaria will be terrible and the soil is a heavy black clay.

Other Oromos I talked to in Buche had similar stories to tell. Oromo refugees from Asosa town who I had talked to in Bikorri in Sudan also told stories of terrible taxation, straight theft and always of their children being stolen and sent to the war. The number of Oromos who have "voluntarily displaced" themselves to the Buche area where they live in great poverty and in an area that will obviously be a swamp in the wet season is further testimony to the conditions they decided to leave.

In the first three months of 1991, about 4,000 refugees from this area crossed the border into Sudan. They included a disproportionate number of young men and teenage boys, fearing conscription.

Burning Villages

Throughout 1990 and into early 1991, the army was active in destroying villages, spreading southward and eastward out of the border area as the OLF gradually gained ground. The testimony of an army deserter obtained by Dr Trevor Trueman, a physician working with a humanitarian agency, and circumstantial evidence suggests that the army utilized special "burning squads". Members of the squads would enter a village after warning shots had scared the inhabitants away, collect farm tools and other implements and place them inside the houses, and then systematically burn all the houses. Crops were also burned.

The following incidents have been confirmed:

- * September 1990: Al Amir area, several villages: 600 houses burned.

- * September: Bela Bangaa village, Tuulu district, burned and attacked from the air, about 700 houses burned.
- * October: Gibao, near Kobar: about 300 houses burned and looted by soldiers.
- * November 8: Shirkale village, near Asosa, burned in an attack by helicopter gunships, killing one civilian and wounding five others.
- * November 21: Fongo, near Kobar: over 90 houses burned by soldiers.
- * November 26: Ego Kurmuk village attacked by helicopter gunships.
- * November 28: Ego Gomono village attacked by helicopter gunships.

The Creation of Famine

It will be clear from the details given above that the government military activity from 1989 onwards was causing great impoverishment. Certainly, visitors to the area report that local people said that they had become much poorer. Dr Trueman estimated that in Al Amir the average area farmed by one family had fallen from 1–2 hectares before the military actions to about half a hectare afterwards. The cumulative effect of enforced villagization, collectivization, destruction of houses and farms by the army, and forcible displacement were added to by the prevention of trade. Donkey trade almost came to a halt in the late 1980s on account of the brutality and demands for money of army patrols and checkpoints. It only restarted after the OLF occupation, but the retreating government forces took with them all cars and trucks, severely disrupting bulk trading. Food prices were climbing fast in early 1991.

There can be no doubt that if the government's counter-insurgency policies had continued for another year or so, and spread to a larger area, famine would have ensued in western Wollega, despite the fact that it is an exceptionally fertile and well-watered area.

Conclusion

Most of the population of the lowlands of Wollega has gone through, in an accelerated form, a version of the destruction, impoverishment and displacement that occurred in Tigray and Eritrea over a longer period. There were certain added complications such as resettlement, and the manner in which the Sudanese civil war directly spilled over into Ethiopia.

While the OLF is in control of the great majority of the area at the time of writing, certain lowland areas adjacent to the Sudan border remain beyond any form of civil authority. Whether peace and stability are established in these parts depends crucially on developments in the Sudanese civil war. Re-establishing civil administration and the rule of law, and resolving the many local ethnic disputes that are certain to arise in this area, will demand considerable skill and patience from the incoming administration.

The Anuak of Illubabor

One group of peripheral people who suffered particularly from the government's policies were the Anuak, who are a Nilotic people who inhabit an area straddling the Sudan border. Many Anuak bore the brunt of violently-enforced resettlement and villagization, and then were overwhelmed by an inflow of Sudanese refugees, accompanied by the SPLA. However, as in the case of most peripheral people, the government followed a strategy of "divide and rule." Certain groups of Anuak certainly benefitted from government patronage and policies. The government armed an Anuak militia, which however had uncertain loyalties. The Anuak in Sudan also suffered from the neglect of their area by successive Sudanese governments, and the outbreak of the Sudanese civil war in 1983, and thus were more sympathetic to the Ethiopian government.

The Ethiopian Anuak numbered an estimated 56,000 in 1970. Historically and culturally they have greater ties with their neighbors in Sudan than they do with the Ethiopian highlands. Their well-watered area has, however, been coveted by successive Ethiopian governments. In 1979, many Anuak were evicted *en masse* when the government set up irrigation schemes on the Baro river. Amhara settlers were brought from the north to farm the schemes. This coincided with an intense conscription campaign for the army.¹⁹ Several hundred Anuak were killed by the army, and in response the Gambela Liberation Front (GLF)²⁰ was set up in 1980. It had links with the OLF and operated through Sudan. There were clashes between the army and the GLF in 1982, with government reprisals against the civilian population.

In 1979, 4,000 Anuak and Nuer fled to Sudan, claiming their land had been confiscated by the government. Shortly afterwards, 3,000 of their

¹⁹ Survival International, 1991, pp. 3-4.

²⁰ Renamed the Gambela People's Liberation Movement in 1985.

southern neighbors, the Begol, also fled to Sudan. Without any investigation of conditions on the Ethiopian side of the border, the UNHCR floated a proposal to repatriate these refugees in 1983.²¹

The resettlement program in Gambela in 1984-6 involved another round of land confiscation. It also meant that the Anuak population was matched by 70,000 new settlers.

In June 1986, villagization began among the Anuak population of Illubabor. The program was implemented in a particularly severe manner. The Anuak population was compelled to relocate in villages integrated with the recently-set up resettlement sites. The new villages have been described as more akin to forced labor camps.²²

In April-May 1987, the re-named GLF staged several attacks on the resettlement sites that were now "integrated" with the new Anuak villages. A clinic in Abol settlement was attacked, apparently with the intention of killing government cadres. Government reprisals included the killing of a number of Anuak, and the enforcement of a strict curfew and related restrictions in Gambela town and nearby areas, by a militia drawn from among the resettlers.

The Anuak were also victims of attacks by the SPLA, with numerous credible but unconfirmed reports of killings of civilians. After 1988 the SPLA gained full control of the Sudan border, and GLF military activity ceased.

In May-June 1991, when the OLF and EPRDF occupied Gambela, the GLF was given a large role in the administration of the area. The Anuak militia was partially disarmed. The GLF is reported to have engaged in attacks on resettlement sites, looting villages and killing tens of civilians.

The SPLA and Sudanese Refugees

Starting in 1983, Sudanese refugees began to flee the war in southern Sudan. Many headed for Ethiopia, where the SPLA and Ethiopian government gave them protection, and international agencies provided assistance.

Two camps were set up in western Illubabor and one in the adjoining area of Keffa. By 1990, Itang camp had 270,000 registered refugees, though in reality it probably held about 150,000, due to some having double-

²¹ Ahmad Karadawi, "Refugee Policy in the Sudan, 1967-84," DPhil thesis, Oxford, 1988, pp. 112, 332.

²² Sandra Steingraber, "Integrated Settlement in Gambella: Armed Uprisings and Government Reprisals," in Clay *et al*, 1988, pp. 236-7.

registered and others having left the camp but remained on the register. Fugnido had 85,000 registered, though actually probably 50,000–60,000. Dima, in Keffa, had 35,000. The population of these camps was about 75% young men and boys. This reached an extreme at Dima camp in 1988, where the population was 97.8%, 86% of them aged between 15 and 45.²³ Part of the explanation for this is that the women and young children had fled the war and famine in a different direction (to northern Sudan), and part is that the refugee camps also operated as military bases for the SPLA.

Security was always tight at the refugee camps. Foreign visitors were given only guided tours, and usually not allowed to stay overnight. The SPLA presence was strong, and uniformed SPLA members were often present. According to a former Commissioner for Relief and Rehabilitation, internationally-donated food aid was diverted to the soldiers of the SPLA.²⁴ In 1991, it was commonly estimated that 20 per cent of the food destined for the camps was diverted to the SPLA, but visitors to the neighboring areas of Sudan report that much of this "diverted" food was in fact being eaten by civilian relatives of the refugees inside Sudan. However, the diversion of ten per cent of the food would have been sufficient to feed half of the combatant members of the SPLA.

According to an arrangement reached with the Ethiopian government, the SPLA was given a free hand in much of Illubabor province, in return for keeping the GLF in check.

In the lowlands of Keffa province, cattle raiding by SPLA units was common. SPLA soldiers would demand cattle from the local population.

The Refugees Return to Sudan, May 1991

In a few days in May and June 1991, almost the entire population of Sudanese refugees in Ethiopia returned to Sudan, precipitating a humanitarian crisis and a major relief operation led by the UN. Allegations were made -- some by the SPLA -- that the refugees had been forcibly driven out by the EPRDF and/or OLF, or that a Sudanese army attack on the camps was planned. None of these claims were true. The SPLA later said that they had led the refugees out, fearing for the safety of the refugees during a breakdown of law and order.

²³ UNHCR Technical Support Service, "Ethiopia: Health and Nutrition Assessment of Southern Sudanese Refugee Camps in Kefa, Illubabor and Wolega Awrajas, 8–22 March 1988," Geneva, 1988, Annexe F.

²⁴ Dawit Wolde Giorgis, *Red Tears: War, Famine and Revolution in Ethiopia*, Trenton, NJ, 1989, p. 158.

In late March 1991, EPRDF forces crossed from Gojjam into Wollega. In the first ten days of April they captured the provincial capital, Nekempte, and other key garrisons. Defeated government soldiers looted several parts of Nekempte town, including stealing property and vehicles belonging to the UN relief operation for Sudanese refugees.

In occupying Wollega, the EPRDF cut the route between Addis Ababa and the Sudanese refugee camps. On April 5, an EPRDF representative assured the UNHCR in Geneva that the Front was willing to cooperate with continued relief programs to the camps, allowing free passage of relief commodities. The UNHCR never took up the offer, presumably because the negotiations necessary to obtain an agreement from both sides would have taken too long, the situation was too unstable, the position of the OLF was unclear, and the UN was fearful for its staff following the looting incidents in Nekempte and the OLF attack on Tsore in 1990. This meant that there were no more food deliveries to the camps. However, grain remained in store, and some distributions occurred.

More generally, the EPRDF said it was willing to see the refugees remain in Ethiopia, but it would not accept the armed presence of the SPLA. In April and May, four separate attempts were made by mediators to bring representatives of the SPLA and EPRDF together to discuss the plight of the refugees. On each occasion the suggestion to meet was rejected by the SPLA -- "why should we talk to them?" was the SPLA attitude.²⁵

Meanwhile there was a series of meetings between the EPRDF and the OLF, and the two organizations agreed to coordinate their military strategy in the southwest. This led to a coordinated advance southward towards Illubabor.

When President Mengistu fled the country on May 22, the imminent collapse of the government was clearly evident. The refugees in the camps were tense, apprehensive of a repeat of the Asosa incident. The relief agencies feared for the safety of their staff, and began to withdraw from Itang, the most northerly camp, on May 24-25. UNHCR evacuated its staff at the same time, taking the keys of the food stores and other vital equipment. The hospital at Itang was left without doctors or administrators. The last staff members left on the morning of May 26.

On the evening of May 26, OLF forces approached the Ethiopian army garrison north of Itang, and EPRDF forces approached Gambela town. The advancing forces shelled both garrisons, and the garrisons replied. However, the government soldiers quickly left, setting fire to their houses

²⁵ "Sudan and Ethiopia; No Rebel Unity," *Middle East International*, June 14, 1991.

and an ammunition dump, which caused a series of explosions. Several bridges across the Baro river were destroyed, almost certainly by government soldiers. Shells fired by the advancing forces landed close to the camps. The shelling and explosions alarmed the refugees -- especially those who had previously fled from Tsore.

Earlier in the year, the SPLA had laid contingency plans for an evacuation of the refugee population.²⁶ The refugees had been warned beforehand that they might have to leave, river transport was arranged for community leaders and administrators, and the migration to Sudan was conducted in a remarkably orderly manner.

Throughout the day of May 26 and the following night, the camp of Itang was evacuated. Most people headed for Nasir; smaller numbers went to Akobo and to the other refugee camps, from where they returned to Sudan. Some people went back to Itang the following day to collect possessions, but members of the government Anuak militia were present, engaging in looting, and this deterred them. There is some evidence that this looting had been planned in advance, for example Anuak militiamen had prevented the camp administrators opening the food stores the day before. The Anuak militia and unaffiliated bandits also preyed on small groups of refugees as they trekked towards Sudan. A Gaajak Nuer militia (also armed by the Ethiopian government) crossed into Sudanese territory (partly because of a conflict with the Anuak militia) and preyed upon the refugees there. Dead bodies of those killed by these militias and bandits floated down the Sobat River the following week.

The camps at Fugnido and Dima were evacuated over the following weeks. The refugees from these camps neither saw nor heard any sign of the OLF or EPRDF forces. In Fugnido they were reportedly warned to leave by armed local people, and migrated to Pochala in Sudan in accordance with SPLA instructions. In Dima, the SPLA closed the camp, looting and destroying vehicles and other property, and ordered the refugees to leave to Pakok in Sudan. The SPLA forces then made a stand inside Ethiopia against the EPRDF forces until they were forced to leave in early July.

The Sudan government was aware in advance of the likely return of the refugees, and closely monitored the return movements, by listening in to radio traffic and sending airplanes to overfly the area. The Sudanese air force bombed Nasir on May 14 (killing 49 people and wounding 50,

²⁶ Proposals had been circulating for some time for a gradual return of the refugees to their homes. Western donors had disagreed over whether it would be better for the refugees to remain or return. Some refugees had also made independent plans to return after the harvest of late 1991.

and forcing the evacuation of the town) and on May 22, killing one. Columns of returning refugees were also bombed, at Jokau (on the way to Nasir) on May 30 and Akobo on May 31. The bombing was carried out from a great height and was highly inaccurate and caused at most one fatality.

A UN-led relief program, including an airdrop of food to Nasir, was implemented almost immediately. Like other such programs in southern Sudan, it has been subject to delays and restrictions by the Sudan government. To date, while a large relief-dependent population exists in Nasir, Pochalla, Akobo, Pakok and in the surrounding areas, the previous good nutritional state of the refugees, the local resources of the area, and the relief program has prevented the extremes of famine.

Conclusion

The continued support of the SPLA for the Mengistu government until its final days was a debacle for the organization, and particularly for its leader Col. John Garang who was personally identified with the policy. The SPLA lost military supplies and bases, its radio station, and a haven for its civilian sympathizers. These factors contributed to an attempted coup by the SPLA military commanders in Upper Nile province in August 1991. The outcome of the split in the SPLA remains uncertain at the time of writing. Relations between the EPRDF, OLF and the two wings of the SPLA will be an important determinant of the peace and stability of the border region in the foreseeable future.

Lowland Gamu Gofa: Carriers of New Guns

The lowlands of Gamu Gofa, adjacent to the frontiers of Sudan and Kenya, is the remotest periphery of Ethiopia. The peoples of this area have never been fully controlled by the highland states -- they are peripheral but not subjugated. They are mostly cattle-herders, and have a history of inter-communal violence. However, in the 1980s, this violence changed markedly, with the supply of modern automatic weapons to some groups. This weaponry upset the previously existing state of approximate balance between different groups, and led to unprecedented numbers of civilian deaths. The increased level of violence was also caused by, and in turn caused, direct military intervention by the Kenyan army, and may yet provoke a similar response from the Ethiopian government.

Conflicts up to the 1980s

The river Omo drains into Lake Turkana in Kenya. In its lower reaches, it passes through territory inhabited by pastoral groups, such as the Dassenatch (also known as Marele), Nyangatom (also known as Dongiro and Bume),²⁷ Mursi, and Hamar. Their immediate neighbors in Sudan are the Toposa and in Kenya are the Turkana.

These peoples have traditionally conducted armed conflict between themselves. Some of this conflict consisted of cattle raiding, and some of disputes over territory. Social anthropologists have observed the rules followed in this local warfare, which include attempting to maintain reciprocity in attacks, and formalizing relations and boundaries after periods of hostility. Dr David Turton, who has been studying the Mursi for over two decades, describes a typical raid carried out by the Hamar, which occurred on December 25, 1969, in the Elma Valley:

In the early hours of the morning a rifle shot was heard by people living nearby but it was assumed that the stock of this [cattle] camp were being worried by hyenas. Later it was discovered that the camp had been raided and three people killed -- the herd owner, who had been shot, and his two sons, aged about seven and thirteen, who were lying where they had been sleeping with their throats cut. All the cattle had been taken and their tracks led in the direction of the Mago Valley. The tracks of the raiders indicated that there were no more than four of them.²⁸

It can be seen that the fighting involved "civilian" loss of life. The hostilities also contributed to recurrent food shortages, not just because loss of cattle or farmland meant loss of food, but because fear of raids led herders to take measures such as keeping their animals in large, well-protected groups, thus not utilizing grazing resources fully, and caused farmers not to cultivate outlying fields.

²⁷ "Before the introduction of firearms, this particular group called themselves Nyam-Etom ('Elephant-Eaters'), which stressed their hunting abilities, but after the acquisition of guns, they rephrased this slightly to Nyang-Atom ([carriers of] 'new guns') which stresses their bellicose qualities instead." Jan-Ake Alvarsson, *Starvation and Peace or Food and War: Aspects of Armed Conflict in the Lower Omo Valley, Ethiopia*, Uppsala, 1989, p.87 (quoting Serge Tornay).

²⁸ David Turton, "Warfare, Vulnerability and Survival: a Case from Southwestern Ethiopia," *Cambridge Anthropology*, 13.2, (1988-9) p. 71.

David Turton also describes a series of wars between the Mursi and their immediate neighbors in the highlands, the Bodi, over territory. Wars occurred in the early 1950s and between 1971 and 1975, and consisted in occasional raids and ambushes, with long quiet periods in between, until a formal peace agreement concluded the conflict and re-drew the territorial boundary.

These conflicts and the measures taken to preserve security directly contributed to famine in the area in 1971-3, when they coincided with drought. The drought and famine itself led to increased pressure on natural resources and led to more conflict with the Bodi. Disease, hunger and homicide all accounted for high levels of mortality during those years.²⁹

Between 1968 and 1971, a war was also fought between the Bodi and their eastern neighbors, the Dime. The Bodi enjoyed the advantage of superior access to firearms, and were able to undertake raids with relative impunity. About 700 Dime men, women and children were killed and a further 1,000 forced to leave the area, a considerable loss to a population totalling no more than 11,000. The war was brought to an end by Mursi attacks on the Bodi and a government punitive expedition which confiscated cattle and firearms.³⁰

Another local war was fought between the Dassenatch and the Nyangatom.³¹ In the late 1960s, the Dassenatch, under pressure from the rising waters of Lake Turkana, which was flooding their farmland, began to press on Nyangatom territory. The Kenyan police enforced a peace in 1966 between Dassenatch, Nyangatom and Toposa, which involved burning several villages and trying to make the Ilemi Triangle a "no-man's land."³²

²⁹ David Turton, "Response to Drought: The Mursi of Ethiopia," in J. P. Garlick and R. W. J. Keays (eds.) *Human Ecology in the Tropics*, London, 1977, p. 180.

³⁰ Dave Todd, "War and Peace between the Bodi and Dime of Southwestern Ethiopia," in Katsuyoshi Fukui and David Turton (eds.) *Warfare among East African Herders*, Osaka, 1979.

³¹ The following is based upon a detailed account of this conflict, in: Serge Tornay, "Armed Conflicts in the Lower Omo Valley, 1970-1976: An Analysis from within Nyangatom Society," in Fukui and Turton (eds.), 1979.

³² The Ilemi triangle is an area of Sudanese territory, adjacent to Ethiopia, that has been administered by Kenya, under agreement, since colonial days. The international frontiers in this area have been drawn without reference to the boundaries and migration patterns local ethnic groups.

This peace began to break down in 1968–71, with killings by all groups, including three Kenyan policemen killed by Dassenatch in July 1970.

In 1972, this developed into a serious Dassenatch–Nyangatom conflict, with each side raiding the other and killing between six and ten people in four separate incidents between March and early June, followed by a major Dassenatch attack on three settlements south of Kibish on June 20, in which at least 204 Nyangatom men, women and children were killed as they slept or awoke. The Nyangatom were driven from their fields before they could harvest, and lost many cattle; famine resulted.

In January 1973, a joint Hamar–Kara war party attacked the Nyangatom, killing between 80 and 100. After the Ethiopian police failed to respond to Nyangatom appeals to intervene, the Nyangatom retaliated and killed 104 Kara at the village of Kurdam the following month. On June 21, the Hamar–Kara alliance attacked the Nyangatom at Aepa on the Omo River, killing about 60. The Nyangatom did not retaliate, as they were preparing (jointly with the Toposa) a raid against the Dassenatch. The raid was only a partial success: the intended victims managed to escape and only five were killed, 3,000 animals were taken, but 20 of the raiders died of thirst on the way home. The Dassenatch counter-attack in December at Kibish left 20 dead.

Further clashes continued into 1974, with at least 41 fatalities. The Nyangatom were in the ascendant: thereafter the Kara were obliged to become the lesser partners in an alliance with their erstwhile opponents.

During this period there were sporadic attempts by the Ethiopian and Kenyan governments to control the local warfare. This included paying compensation for cross-border raids, negotiating settlements, undertaking punitive patrols (four against the Dassenatch), and on one occasion, aerial bombardment of villages (the Ethiopian government against the Hamar).

Between the mid-1970s and 1986, the level of violence was much lower, with only 28 confirmed inter-tribal homicides.³³

These conflicts remained under the control of the leaders of the respective ethnic groups. While involving regular violence and homicide, the problems remained within well-defined limits, and the level of military technology was low. In the 1980s, with the intervention of regular armed groups, notably the SPLA and the Kenyan army, and supplies of modern weaponry from these sources and from the Sudan government, conditions began to change, and bloodshed on a larger scale began to occur.

³³ Alvarsson, 1989, p. 77.

The Nyangatom Massacre of the Mursi

In the mid-1980s, both the SPLA and the Sudan government began to distribute automatic weapons to a number of cattle-herding people close to the Sudan-Ethiopia border. These groups then participated in cattle raiding inside Ethiopia. One group that was heavily armed was the Toposa, who were supported by the Khartoum government as an anti-SPLA militia. The Toposa in turn distributed arms to local allies inside Ethiopia, prominent among whom were the Nyangatom.

The Nyangatom were one group which benefitted from the Sudanese supply of weapons. The Chai, as noted above, lost out heavily. The Mursi were next in line. Mursi-Nyangatom conflict has been longstanding, interspersed with periods of friendly relations and indeed interdependence with mutual trade. A typical incident of homicide occurred in April 1985, when two Mursi boys were shot dead by Nyangatom. Cases such as this were not considered exceptional; a cause for retribution but not for upsetting a fundamentally equitable relationship. In 1987, however, events occurred out of all proportion to what had gone before.

In January or early February 1987, six Nyangatom who were visiting a Mursi village to buy grain were killed by their hosts, using guns and bush-knives. This was considered an outrageous violation of local norms of hospitality. In retaliation, the Nyangatom launched a massive raid on February 21. Equipped with automatic weapons, the destruction was unprecedented. A man who lost three family members in the attack recounted what happened.

The Nyangatom crossed the Omo at the Kara village of Dus, south of the Omo-Mago junction and, guided by Kara, moved northwards up the east bank of the Omo, crossed the Mago and attacked the southern Mursi, who were now sitting targets, from the east. Thus, when the attack began at first light, the Mursi assumed that their attackers were Hamar.³⁴ It was only when they heard the sound of automatic rifles that they realised they were Nyangatom.

The slaughter was indiscriminate, most of those killed being women and children. This was, firstly, because a good proportion of the men were with the cattle, north of the Dara range and, secondly, because it was easier for men and boys, unencumbered with young children,

³⁴ The significance of this is that the Hamar were not in conflict with the Mursi, so that the worst that could be expected was a small-scale cattle raid.

to scatter and hide in the bush. The majority of people were killed with spears, having been wounded in the rifle fire. One particularly respected elder, who was well-known to the Nyangatom, was deliberately sought out and speared to death. The hands of women and girls were chopped off with bush knives so that their metal bracelets could be more easily removed ...³⁵

Another visitor to the area met a girl who survived despite having both wrists severed with almost surgical neatness. Another Mursi described the aftermath of the massacre:

The vultures could not eat all the corpses. Crocodiles pulled the bodies into the water. The grass down there died because of all the fat from the bodies.³⁶

Between 600 and 800 were killed — over ten per cent of the entire Mursi population. Almost the entire southernmost section of the Mursi was annihilated.

The anthropologist Jan-Ake Alvarsson spoke with Nyangatom who had participated in the massacre and recounted how it had come about.

The attack in question had been well planned in advance. The force was supposed to charge at dawn, the vanguard consisting of four people, armed with one heavy and three light machine guns. They were also to carry four hand grenades. The second line was supposed to give the first one cover. They were equipped with sixteen carbines. The third line carried the ordinary (Austrian) rifles,³⁷ and the rest were intended to follow suit, equipped with spears or bush knives and to finish off those shot down by the front lines.

In reality, things turned out differently.... It is unclear whether the target [i.e. which Mursi section] or the day of the battle were the ones planned. Furthermore, the army crossed the Omo around 8 a.m., much later than planned, and the attack was not as surprising as intended as people were

³⁵ Paraphrase based on an eyewitness account, in: Turton, 1988-89, p. 83.

³⁶ In: "The Land is Bad," a film by Leslie Woodhead, shown on Independent Television, UK, July 17, 1991.

³⁷ These weapons were widely available during and after the second world war, most brought by the Italians.

awake. The military order was soon transformed into an unordered and undisciplined row. At least eight Nyangatom warriors were killed from behind by their own forces during the phase of wild shooting.³⁸

The Mursi reprisal was taken against the Kara, the weaker part of the attacking alliance. On March 28, six Kara (including two children) were killed by Mursi, who retaliated by killing seven Mursi. In November, two Nyangatom were killed while working on a dug-out canoe. These were however only short term responses. The Mursi were emphatic that a counter-raid on a comparable scale was needed before an equitable peace could be concluded with the Nyangatom.

Mursi plans for counter-attack verged on the suicidal -- they were heavily outnumbered and possessed no automatic weapons. A much greater danger was further Nyangatom raids, which if carried out on a comparable scale, could have meant the end of the Mursi as a group.

The Kenyan Massacre of the Nyangatom

These plans and fears were overtaken by events. The Nyangatom were also engaged in raiding some of their other neighbors, such as the Dassenatch. In July 1988, in alliance with the Toposa, they carried out one such raid in the Ilemi Triangle. About 60 people were killed in the attack. Earlier in the year the Kenyan government had decided to annex the Triangle, and was fast developing a military presence in the area. The Sudan government was able to lodge only diplomatic protests, as all the surrounding countryside was controlled by the SPLA, which enjoys close relations with Kenya.

The Kenyan government has a long-standing hostility to the pastoralists who live on its borders, who cross the international frontiers as if they did not exist, and who engage in livestock raiding. The administration of these nomads has long consisted of punitive expeditions interspersed with attempts to persuade them to live a settled life, wear clothes and send their children to school.

On July 28, the Kenyan police clashed with a group of Toposa or Nyangatom raiders who had previously attacked the Dassenatch, and came off worst. Fifteen policemen were killed, and some taken hostage. The Kenyan government responded the following day with an attack using helicopter gunships and paramilitary forces on the Nyangatom area of Kibish, which straddles Ethiopia, Kenya and Sudan. About 200 Nyangatom

³⁸ Alvarsson, 1989, p. 68.

raiders and a minimum of 500 civilians were killed by the Kenyan forces over the following 18 days. In the attack, at least five villages inside Ethiopia were partly destroyed, and the Swedish Philadelphia Mission at Kibish was burned. The Kenyan army also undertook a retaliatory massacre against the Toposa in Sudan.³⁹

Recent reports indicate that another round of killings may have started, with a reliable account that Mursi raiders killed tens of Ari in May 1991 in retaliation for the killing of one Mursi.

Conclusion

Successive Ethiopian governments centered in the highlands have shared a similar attitude to pastoral nomads to that of the Kenyan government. The power base of the EPRDF is, like its predecessors, located in the highlands. The EPRDF avows an ideology which gives equality to all and the right of self-determination to peripheral people. However, the First National Congress of the EPRDF, held in February 1991, adopted a political program that included an item resolving "to settle nomads in settled agriculture."⁴⁰ This implies that if nomadic pastoralists do not agree to settle, the state is entitled to settle them by force. The history of such attempts indicates that the nomads will resist. Democratic rights and the enforced settlement of nomads are incompatible.

The Lower Omo valley presents a more general challenge to the government of Ethiopia (and indeed those of Kenya and Sudan). It is an area where their writ scarcely runs, and where central control can only be enforced by extraordinarily high levels of violence. Government-mediated settlements of local conflicts, the so-called "stranger's peace", can be successful only when both sides to the conflict share an interest in a settlement, and the terms of the settlement can be enforced. At least one such negotiated "stranger's peace" broke down in the 1970s for these reasons. A lasting peace and respect for human rights in this troubled area can only be achieved through long and patient interaction with the indigenous people, undertaken by all the governments concerned.

³⁹ See: Africa Watch report, *Kenya: Taking Liberties*, July 1991, pp. 334-6.

⁴⁰ Revolutionary Democratic Program of the EPRDF adopted at the First National Congress, Political Program, Article 8(d).

19. DIVIDE AND MISRULE: THE EAST, 1984-91

In 1983-4, the Ethiopian government completed a bloody victory over the insurgencies in the southeast. The Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF), Somali-Abo Liberation Front (SALF) and Sidama Liberation Front were all defeated and the OLF was severely weakened and would no longer pose a significant military threat. A key element in this success was the Ethiopian government's strategy of fostering divisions in the ranks of the insurgents: its support for the Somali National Movement (SNM) against the WSLF was the clearest example. In this strategy of "divide and rule," the Ethiopian government was, ironically, assisted by the Somali government, which was following exactly the same strategy.

As a result, the lines of conflict became more fragmented and complex. As well as attacks on civilians by the Somali and Ethiopian armies, there was an increasing level of inter-communal violence which extended throughout eastern Ethiopia, Somalia and Djibouti. This chapter documents some of the abuses of human rights that resulted from this fragmentation, for which the Siad Barre and Mengistu governments share ultimate responsibility.

Unrest in the Ogaden

The Ogaden did not return to peace after the defeat of the WSLF; but neither was there widespread rebellion. Instead there was a low level of violence between the well-armed but impoverished, restricted and frustrated herders, and the Ethiopian army, police and members of other communities. A breakaway group from the WSLF, the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) was formed in 1984, but failed to make a military impact.¹

The drought of 1984 together with government policies led to a number of violent incidents in the Ogaden. The villagization of the highland Oromo involved the relocation of many communities in areas which had previously been used as pasture by the herders. Other areas were allocated to resettlers from Wollo. There were a number of violent disputes between the pastoralists and farmers.

¹ The words "Western Somali" in "WSLF" indicate an attachment to the ideal of a greater Somalia; the "Ogaden National" title of the ONLF indicates the belief that the Ogaden are a nationality, not merely a clan, and indicates no relationship with the Somali state.

In September or October 1987, in retaliation for an ambush on a military lorry at Dhakato, for which the ONLF claimed credit, army units moved to Fiiq, south of Harer, confiscated animals and killed three people.

A series of incidents occurred in August 1988. Ogadeni herders had delivered their animals to the government Livestock Exporting Company agents in Gode and Degahabur, and were awaiting payment. The payment did not come; and in reprisal some herders attacked a government geological team in the area, killing one Soviet and three Ethiopian technicians. An army force responded by surrounding the livestock herds which had congregated at a well at Bulale and holding the animals until the killers were handed over. The herders denied knowing who was responsible for the killing, and the animals were confiscated.

This event led to increased tension between the army -- still behaving like an occupying force -- and the local people. Shortly beforehand, the army had refused to let the herders use a valley between Degahabur and Aware for grazing. It had been a traditional pasture area used especially during times of drought, but had been occupied by the army as a training area. Use of the valley had become more important since 1984 when another valley at Tur, near Gode, had been allocated to a resettlement scheme for farmers from Wollo. The members of a delegation sent by local people to protest their exclusion were detained. Some young Ogadeni herders (armed, as is usual) wandered into the restricted area, whereupon an army unit opened fire on them. The herders fired back. According to reports, 21 of the herders and three soldiers were killed. In another incident at Dhanaan, soldiers killed 17 herders in a punitive expedition mounted in reprisal for the killing of a government officer, before senior army officers intervened and ordered them to halt.

While most of the violence was between Ogadeni clansmen and the army, there were also clashes with member of other clans. One incident occurred in 1985, following a fight between herders belonging to the Isaaq and Abasguul clans. The governor of Jijiga ordered the army into the area and 125 Isaaq herders were reported killed.

Arming Refugees in Somalia, 1984-87

The refugee population in northern Somalia played a central role in the conflicts that developed after the demise of the WSLF in 1983. This occurred because the Somali government used them for military purposes against the SNM. At first, only members of the Ogaden clan were conscripted or armed; later this included members of all Somali clans and also Oromo refugees. The arming of refugees was well under way before the outbreak of full-scale war in northern Somalia in May 1988.

Immediately after its military defeat in March 1978, the Somali government began recruiting Ogadeni refugees into the WSLF. In 1983, this was changed, and refugees were instead conscripted directly into the army. A special Division (the 12th) was formed, initially comprising 5,000 refugee conscripts, the great majority of whom were from the Ogaden clan. The conscription of refugees to the military is contrary to international law, under the 4th Geneva Convention of 1949.

From early 1984, the 12th Division was used against the local Isaaq population. Some of the abuses it committed include:

- * December 6, 1984: Sheikh area: in retaliation for an ambush by the SNM in which the commander of the 12th Division was killed, soldiers rounded up teachers, merchants and others and transferred them to Burao, where they were later shot. A total of 43 were executed in this incident.²
- * January 1988: Alleybadey: about 20 civilians executed.
- * March 14, 1988: Gebiley and Tug Wajale: 25 community leaders executed in reprisal for an SNM attack.³

In 1985, as unrest intensified in northern Somalia and more Isaaq soldiers and officers defected from the army to the SNM, the Somali government increasingly used force to obtain conscripts to fill the gaps in the ranks of other divisions. Between 1985 and 1987, refugee health workers were taken more than ten times, and high level intervention was needed by the refugee administration to obtain their release. At one point in 1987, 140 community health workers were press-ganged; 50 were taken in 1986, together with a number of hospital outpatients.⁴ In May 1987, the Somali army raided the refugee camp at Bihin near Berbera and took 200-300 refugees for military service, and also took conscripts from the

² See Africa Watch report, *A Government at War with its Own People: Somalia: Testimonies about the Killings and the Conflict in the North*, January 1990, p. 65.

³ Africa Watch report, 1990, p. 65 and appendix 5.

⁴ Africa Watch interview with Mohamed Dahir Khaire, Refugee Health Unit, September 1991.

nearby Biyoley camp. During September and October 1987, 5,000–7,000 refugees were forcibly conscripted in the camps.⁵

The recruitment operations often included violence against refugees, including some killings. UNHCR protests to the government met with no response. However, these were not backed up with effective sanctions. The US and other western donors continued to support the Somali government with generous and unconditional aid, seeing it as a strategic cold-war ally.

Starting in November 1984, the government also created camp militia. The rationale for this was that refugee camps were often located in remote places, far from army and police posts, and increasing SNM incursions meant that a self-defense capacity was required. Members of the Ogaden clan received arms preferentially.

During 1984–6, there was a new influx of Oromo refugees, fleeing villagization and related atrocities. Some of the new refugee camps (for example Bihin and Bioley) were sited in remote areas, unsuitable on account of poor access and health hazards. The rationale behind their location was that they would provide a military presence in these areas, where the SNM was active.

In 1985, the Somali government began to arm some of the Oromo refugees. An organization was created headed by Sheikh Ibrahim Belissa, a religious leader who was formerly a member of the Somali–Abo Liberation Front, who was living in exile in Hargeisa. Sheikh Belissa's Oromo front was assisted with arms and internationally-donated food aid, with the intention that it would infiltrate into northern Harerghe province of Ethiopia to engage the Ethiopian army and the SNM. Before 1988, it did not engage in military actions or commit significant atrocities inside Somalia.

There was also a small group of Amhara refugees in Somalia, some of whom were pressured into joining the Somali army — the alternative was indefinite restriction to a refugee camp or detention.⁶

The refugee camps thus became military targets. One of the first SNM actions against the camps was the kidnapping of a French medical team in Tug Wajale camp on January 24, 1987. The eleven members of the team were released unharmed after ten days.

⁵ *Agence France Presse*, October 27, 1987.

⁶ Hiram Ruiz, "Detained in Exile: Ethiopians in Somalia's Shelembod Camp," United States Committee for Refugees, Washington, D.C., 1987.

Other Somali-backed Fronts

The Somali government also fostered two other small armed fronts from among refugees, residents on northern Somalia, and former fighters of the WSLF.

After the demise of the WSLF, one of its divisions, known as Iil Tire, remained active among members of the Issa clan in northern Harerghe. This was later renamed the Issa and Gurgura Liberation Front (IGLF), and joined the EPRDF. It enjoyed the support of the Somali government, and clashed with the SNM on the Somali border. It is unclear whether clashes between the Issa and Oromo communities near Dire Dawa and the Issa and Afar in the late 1980s were related to the IGLF, or were due instead to armed members of the clan unaffiliated to it.

In the late 1980s, the Somali government also assisted a Gadabursi Front (also known as the Somali Democratic Alliance). The Gadabursi Front was hostile to the SNM and is reported to have killed a mentally-handicapped Isaaq civilian in a reprisal attack in 1989.⁷

The conscription and arming of refugees in southern Somalia also took place, though there was no outright warfare in the region at the time.

Peace and War in Northern Somalia, April–May 1988

On April 1–2, 1988, just two weeks after the EPLF victory at Afabet, President Mengistu hurriedly negotiated a formal peace with Somalia. His aim was the transfer of troops from the Ogaden to Eritrea. The belated peace agreement also allowed for the exchange of prisoners of war captured in the war a decade before, and for the repatriation of refugees to be put on a more formal basis. Finally, an essential part of the agreement was a commitment by each country to end assistance to insurgent groups operating out of each others' territory. While neither side followed this policy fully, the promised expulsion of the SNM from Ethiopia had immediate consequences.

In late May, the SNM launched surprise attacks on the major towns of northern Somalia, and succeeded in occupying Burao and most of Hargeisa.

The delivery of relief supplies to the Ethiopian refugees was cut off, and the fighting also included several SNM attacks on refugee camps.

⁷ Robert Gersony, "Why Somalis Flee: Synthesis of Accounts of Conflict Experiences in Northern Somalia by Somali Refugees, Displaced Persons and Others," Bureau for Refugee Programs, Department of State, Washington, D.C., 1989, p. 43.

According to testimonies obtained by Robert Gersony of the US State Department, the SNM attacked nine refugee camps in the region and killed at least 240 civilians.⁸ While the killing of civilians is a grave abuse, the camps themselves also constituted genuine military targets.

Further abuses against refugees occurred in early 1989. The SNM executed ten prisoners of war whom it described as "Ethiopian refugees who had received weapons from the Somali Armed Forces in order to combat the SNM."⁹ Another reported incident took place in March when eleven Ogadeni refugees (including three children) were killed and 16 wounded in an SNM attack on a truck.

The Somali army responded with land and air attacks against the SNM and the towns of northern Somalia causing an extremely high level of devastation.¹⁰

Refugee soldiers and militia were prominent during the army counter-offensive. This included Ogaden refugee units in the regular army (notably the 12th Division), members of the camp militias, and -- for the first time -- Sheikh Belissa's Oromo front, which fought alongside the army. These attacks witnessed an extraordinarily high level of indiscriminate violence against the civilian population, including routine summary executions, looting and rape as well as some large-scale massacres.

As a result of the war, about 20,000 refugees returned to Ethiopia and about 400,000 northern Somalis also fled across the border to take refuge in camps near Jijiga.

Upheaval in Southern Somalia, January 1991

In 1989, the Ethiopian government also began to provide arms and support to the United Somali Congress (USC), a recently-formed opposition group active in central/southern Somalia.

In January 1991, the government of Siad Barre was finally overthrown after a prolonged battle in Mogadishu. The USC was the immediate victor: although a relative newcomer to the opposition, it drew its support from the vicinity of the capital and so was able to occupy the seat of power -- or what was left of it. The fall of the Siad Barre government did not,

⁸ Gersony, 1989, pp. 50-2, 63. Contrary to Gersony's claims, there was widespread distribution of arms to the refugees during the preceding years.

⁹ Gersony, 1989, p. 34.

¹⁰ See Africa Watch report, *Somalia*, 1990.

however, mean peace or stability. Fighting and insecurity continues in Mogadishu and the countryside.

The breakdown in security and the resulting cut-off in supplies to the refugee camps made life extremely difficult for the refugees in southern Somalia. There were also a number of attacks on refugees. On January 21-25, over 100 refugees were reported killed at Baladweyne by USC forces. Other attacks on refugees occurred in the Hiran region.¹¹

These factors cumulatively led to a massive return of refugees from Somalia, plus an inflow of refugees. About 140,000 refugees and returnees crossed the border in a matter of two months, and numbers continued to increase. 90,000 crossed into northern Harerghe, about 100,000 into the southern Ogaden, and 50,000 into the lowlands of Sidamo. This created a humanitarian crisis, especially in the remote southern Ogaden camps.

The Oromo Fronts in Ethiopia

By 1984, Ethiopian military strategy was effective in counter-acting the threat posed by the OLF and the Oromo Islamic Fronts (OIF)¹² in Harerghe. The combination of villagization, continued military operations and cutting off any possible support from Somalia proved successful. The Somali government's strategy of using the Oromo population and fronts for its own purposes contributed to this military eclipse.

The OIF, headed by Sheikh Jarer, emerged as a significant force in northeast Harerghe in the mid-1980s. Sheikh Jarer was a military commander in the OLF until he split from them in 1978 to form his own movement, which in about 1985 acquired the label "Islamic."¹³ It acquired support from the Somali government and a link with Sheikh Belissa's front inside northern Somalia, though the extent to which the two fronts cooperated in military terms is unclear. The Somali government closed the OLF office in Mogadishu in 1982 and prevented the organization

¹¹ A report by the OLF on February 11, 1991, that over 600 Oromo refugees were killed by Ethiopian forces at Luuq, has not been confirmed and was almost certainly inaccurate (BBC, *Summary of World Broadcasts*, ME/0995, February 13, 1991).

¹² This front has used a variety of names during its existence; OIF is used here for convenience.

¹³ The front has no significant links with Islamic fundamentalist organizations in Sudan or the Middle East. "Sheikh Jarer" is a *nom de guerre*; he is not a religious leader.

operating from Somalia. There was also lack of unity between the OLF and OIF and both failed to cooperate with the WSLF. These factors combined with the success of the SNM in controlling the northern Ogaden border to create a great hindrance on the successful maintenance of an Oromo insurrection in the southeast.

Throughout the period 1985–91, atrocities by the Ethiopian army accompanied routine actions against suspected OLF sympathizers, and reprisals after OLF actions. For example, in February 1987, there are credible reports that the army killed up to 270 people at Qadridayah and Dibleley, in reprisal for an attack by the OLF.¹⁴ The following month, the army sealed off wells at Bullale, causing many animals to die of thirst, and in July, the army rounded up an estimated 8,000 villagers and kept them for a while in four military camps. While most were later released, seven were reported shot dead, 41 remained in detention, and 23 young women were kept for the soldiers' sexual gratification.

Some instances of OLF killings of civilians have also been reported, including the selective killing of Amhara settlers in eastern Harerghe in March 1990.

The Ethiopian government launched a number of military actions against the OIF. It also engaged in a systematic attempt to destroy centers of Moslem learning in Harerghe, which it saw as the source of anti-government mobilization. During 1985 and 1986, mosques, Islamic schools, tombs of local Moslem holy men and pilgrimage sites were destroyed. These included Fayaanbiro mosque and Sufi lodge (near Babile), the Sheikh Sayed Ahmed lodge at Babile, and the tomb of Abdel Rahman Zeilahi, between Degahabur and Qabridaharre.

The OIF clashed with the SNM on several occasions, particularly after 1988. In January 1991, an SNM unit kidnapped Sheikh Belissa and handed him over to the Ethiopian government; he was detained until the fall of the government in May. This incident reportedly led to violence between the Oromo and Isaaq communities inside Ethiopia.

Instances in which OIF units engaged in ethnically-based violence against Amhara settlers have also been reported.

On one or two occasions, the OIF also came into conflict with the OLF. Some of the OIF leaders were defectors from the OLF, and there was deep resentment between the two organizations. There were armed clashes between the two fronts on several occasions, and OIF units ambushed and killed some members of the OLF.

¹⁴ *Africa Contemporary Record*, 1987–8, p. B288.

The EPRDF Takeover, May-June 1991

Until 1991, all the armed Oromo and Somali groups in eastern Ethiopia had one thing in common: the knowledge that if their military activities became too successful, the army would engage in large-scale reprisals. The sudden collapse of the Ethiopian army in May 1991 removed this fear. The divisions that had deepened over the previous years were the cause of an increase in inter-communal violence. Neither the OLF nor the OIF had sufficient military strength or political mobilization to fill the power vacuum that suddenly appeared.

In the days after the EPRDF entered Addis Ababa, the Third Army in Harerge was deeply split. Some officers proposed surrendering to the EPRDF; others proposed resistance, and still others tried to flee the country. In Dire Dawa the small garrison put up no resistance and the town was occupied on the evening of May 29. In the brief interregnum there was a looting spree, especially of the airport, and about six people were killed. There were also ominous signs of inter-ethnic violence between the Issa Somali and the Oromo communities. On May 30, there were anti-EPRDF demonstrations in the town, which were dispersed when EPRDF fighters fired over the heads of the crowd. No casualties were reported.

Two senior army officers who attempted to flee the country by helicopter were apprehended by army units close to the border and later handed over to the EPRDF.

The only significant resistance occurred around Harer, where a garrison of about 10,000 troops was stationed. On May 28, the commanding officer of the Harer garrison announced a surrender. Two days later, middle-ranking officers, encouraged by a spate of anti-EPRDF demonstrations by students, mutinied and killed their superiors, and vowed to fight against the EPRDF. The mutiny led to widespread violence in Harer, including looting and killing. One employee of a UN relief program was killed outside the Ras Hotel in the town center on May 31. By June 1, the mutineers had gained control, and prepared defensive lines close to a military base outside the town on the Dire Dawa road and distributed arms to the civilian population with instructions to defend the town itself.

On June 2, the EPRDF force attacked the army positions. About 600-800 combatants were killed in the engagement, probably including some former civilians armed and mobilized by the mutineers. The EPRDF forces won the battle. Most of the armed civilians refused the order to defend Harer and instead let the EPRDF peacefully occupy the town the following day. The occupation was disciplined and there are no reports of fighters committing abuses against civilians.

The disintegration of the army and police led to a sudden upsurge in banditry, including some robbery by deserting soldiers. A relief convoy was attacked at Kebri Dehar on May 30, and two trucks were stolen. Eight other relief vehicles were stolen in other incidents, and many rural roads became impassable.

Continuing Violence Since the EPRDF Takeover

In the rural areas around Harer, there are numerous reports of violence against Amhara civilians, including employees of the government and the United Nations agencies, mainly by Oromo residents. Some of the violence can be traced to members of the OIF. A number of Amhara civilians fled from the towns of Harerghe to Addis Ababa, fearing for their lives. Some reported that they had been ordered to leave the region within 24 hours.

There was a serious incident of inter-communal violence in Dire Dawa on July 7. A large section of the Oromo community held a political rally in the soccer stadium, sponsored by the OLF. After the rally a number of armed Oromo gathered and attacked Issa civilians in the town, killing eight. EPRDF forces intervened to stop the fighting and disarm the two groups; about 12-15 people were killed during this operation. In reprisal for the deaths of the Issa civilians, between July 8 and 15, Issas in Djibouti attacked Oromo refugees. Between ten and 15 were confirmed killed, though some Oromo sources claimed that the number was as high as 200. About 500 refugees fled to seek sanctuary in the compound of the UNHCR, and several thousand sought refuge among Afar groups in Djibouti, particularly in Arbeha. There is fear that this inter-communal violence may intensify and bring about a civil war in Djibouti and neighboring areas of Ethiopia.

In the highlands of Harerghe and Bale, many rural communities also resisted the re-introduction of central authority in the form of the EPRDF. Community leaders argued that there was no need for an EPRDF military presence, because the areas were "liberated" already. Incidents of violence have occurred between residents and EPRDF forces, and a number of people have been killed. The fighting has been sufficiently serious to close main roads in Harerghe for weeks. It has caused friction between the EPRDF and the OLF; the EPRDF demanded that the OLF demobilize its fighters so as to restore law and order, or close its offices. However it is highly questionable whether the armed units are under the command of the OLF. An agreement was reached on August 27 which established zones of control for both organizations, but did not address the fundamental problems the mutual suspicions between local Oromo villagers and the EPRDF units controlling the towns and main roads.

The Oromo highlands of the southeast present a major challenge to the new government. The EPRDF needs to maintain law and order and to allow the expression of popular aspirations without resorting to indiscriminate violence. The OLF and OIF, for their part, needs to ensure that the legitimate demands of the population are not channelled into violent resistance while the options of democratic participation are open.

20. WESTERN POLICY TOWARDS ETHIOPIA

Ethiopia has had close relations with a number of western countries throughout the 20th century, including Belgium, France, Great Britain, Israel, Italy, Sweden, and the United States. Successive governments have turned selectively to different western countries for economic, military and diplomatic support. During and immediately after the Second World War, the Ethiopian government was dominated by Britain. The British army had been instrumental in liberating the country from Italian fascist rule in 1941, and British military administration continued in Eritrea until 1952. Thereafter, Haile Selassie began to cultivate closer ties with the United States.

US Policy and Haile Selassie

Ethiopia under the Emperor Haile Selassie was the United States' closest ally in Africa. This was due to several factors. One was that after the Second World War the US was promoting a policy of decolonization in Africa and Asia. Ethiopia, as the only indigenous independent state in Africa, was symbolically central to this policy, which was duly encouraged by Haile Selassie. The Emperor was instrumental in the formation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and its adoption of a pro-western stance and conservative position on inherited boundaries. A second reason was Ethiopia's strategic position adjacent to the Red Sea, and its possession of the communications center at Kagnaw, near Asmara. For more than a decade after the US signed a 25 year lease on Kagnaw base in 1953, it was the most important "listening post" in the Middle East.

The strategic value of Ethiopia's Red Sea coastline, all of which fell in the territory of Eritrea, and of Kagnaw station, meant that the US was an enthusiastic supporter of the unity of Eritrea and Ethiopia. In a now famous statement, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles said to the UN Security Council in 1952:

From the point of view of justice, the opinions of the Eritrean people must receive consideration. Nevertheless, the strategic interest of the United States in the Red Sea basin and considerations of security and world peace make it necessary that the country has to be linked to our ally, Ethiopia.

As a consequence, from 1953-76, Ethiopia was the largest recipient of US aid in Africa. This included generous military assistance, based on

the 1953 Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement. Ethiopia received more than half of the US's entire military assistance to Africa during this period. Between 1953-76 the US trained and equipped an army of about 40,000 men and an air force of 2,000, at a cost of \$280 million.¹ The annual subsidy to the army was about \$12 million. About 4,000 officers and air force personnel were trained in the US. However, when Haile Selassie made repeated requests for increased arms deliveries to offset the threat of Soviet-armed Somalia after 1960, the US was unwilling to supply all the armaments and finance he requested. Such requests were made in 1967 and 1973, and turned down because the US considered them excessive.

Earlier, in recognition of US support, Haile Selassie had sent a battalion to fight in Korea. However, he was no simple vassal of the US; for example he visited the Soviet Union and to discuss economic and military assistance, and publicly supported the Arab states over against Israel in 1973.

The United States was not the only western supporter of Haile Selassie. In the 1940s and '50s, and to a lesser extent afterwards, the Swedish government had supplied training and material for the Imperial bodyguard and the air force. The British trained the army until 1949, and provided limited technical assistance thereafter. Ethiopia and Israel signed a military pact in 1958, whereby Israel provided training at the Holeta military academy and (from 1964) counter-insurgency advisors in Eritrea. This continued until Haile Selassie broke diplomatic relations with Israel in October 1973, in deference to the OAU's support for the Arab states in the 1973 Arab-Israeli war. Ethiopian-Israeli relations remained warm, however, and Israeli military advisors returned during 1975-7.

The West and the Revolution

In the early days of the revolution, the United States continued to be the major foreign power with an interest in Ethiopia. For three years from the outbreak of popular unrest in February 1974, the US attitude can be described as conciliatory but concerned. Other western governments followed comparable policies, while internal conditions led to scaled down assistance to development programs. Italy -- worried about the welfare of the large numbers of Italian citizens, especially in besieged Asmara -- remained close to the government diplomatically, but net flows of economic aid completely dried up by 1977. Thereafter there was a dramatic break

¹ Lemmu Baissa, "Militarization and Foreign Policy in the Horn of Africa," in *Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on the Horn of Africa*, CUNY, New York, May 26-28, 1991.

in US-Ethiopian relations, which cooled to the point of becoming frozen in cold-war hostility.

For its part, the Dergue both demanded armaments from the US, and attacked "US Imperialism" in official pronouncements, before instigating the rupture itself.

During 1974-6, the US policy of supplying generous military aid to Ethiopia continued.² In fact, in 1975 and 1976, arms shipments increased substantially. However, the amounts delivered were not enough to satisfy the Dergue, which sent missions to a variety of countries asking for military assistance. The US expressed dismay at certain Ethiopian military policies, notably the 1976 Peasants' March on Eritrea, and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger went so far as to say that if the march went ahead, continued US military assistance would be jeopardized. On the whole, however, the US sought to influence events by maintaining warm relations with the government, including considering increased arms requests. This was not to last.

The inauguration of President Jimmy Carter in January 1977 was followed within a month by the seizure of absolute power by Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam. Mengistu was not only the most determined, ruthless and militaristic of the Dergue members, but he was the USSR's closest ally in the government. Pro-Soviet and anti-American statements became more frequent and vitriolic, and arms shipments from the USSR started immediately. The Red Terror officially began. On February 23, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Talcott Seelye visited Addis Ababa and told the government that it could expect a termination of military assistance, on human rights grounds.

Since 1977, when they were first issued, the Department of State's annual human rights reports on Ethiopia have, with few exceptions, been thorough and objective.

In April 1977, the US notified the Ethiopian government of the imminent closure of Kagnew station the following September when the 25-year lease expired. The decision had in fact been made in 1973, on purely technical grounds (the base had been superseded by the use of aerial and satellite reconnaissance). On April 30, Colonel Mengistu responded by unilaterally terminating the Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement, and ordering all US military personnel to leave immediately. Shortly afterwards, he ordered a cut in US Embassy staff of 50%.

² The following discussion owes much to: David A. Korn, *Ethiopia, The United States and the Soviet Union*, London, 1986.

The US-Ethiopia breach was confirmed by the massive airlift of Soviet arms to Ethiopia during the Ethiopia-Somalia war. In November 1977, the US embargoed all arms deliveries to both Ethiopia and Somalia. Shortly thereafter, the US made a military pact with Somalia, which had just expelled the Soviets, accusing them of perfidy. (The naval base at Berbera was the strategic prize that changed hands.) Ethiopia's other longtime regional adversary, Sudan, also moved closer to the US at this time. Meanwhile, between 1975 and 1980, Ethiopia's arms budget jumped tenfold. More than \$1 billion in military assistance was provided by the USSR, and 13,000 Cuban combat troops were stationed in the country. East German security advisors were to follow.

Despite Mengistu's evident preference for closer ties with the Soviet Union, the US continued to make efforts to ensure that relations were not broken off altogether. In 1978, the incoming US Ambassador, Frederick Chapin, recommended a small program of economic assistance, and a small amount of non-lethal military assistance was provided to the army. However, any further attempts to upgrade economic ties were prevented by the Hickenlooper Amendment to the Foreign Assistance Act, which stipulates that all US development assistance must be cut off to a country which nationalizes US-owned assets without providing compensation. Some 25 US companies claimed compensation amounting to \$30 million following the Ethiopian government's nationalizations of 1975, and the Ethiopian government refused to pay this relatively insignificant sum.

The failure to reach agreement on the compensation issue, together with increasing cold-war tension, led to further mutual US-Ethiopian hostility. In 1979, the USAID program was officially terminated, and in 1980, the US Ambassador was asked to leave; since then, the US has been represented by a charge d'affaires. In 1981, Ethiopia signed more far-reaching agreements with the USSR, allowing it use of military bases in the Red Sea islands, and signed the Tripartite Agreement with South Yemen and Libya. In 1982, the Reagan Administration's policy review for the Horn of Africa determined to isolate Ethiopia, supporting its pro-western neighbors, but stopped short of supporting the rebel fronts.³ In 1984, when BandAid leader Bob Geldof visited Ethiopia and suggested that private agencies pay the \$30 million compensation due under the Hickenlooper

³ The conservative Ethiopian Democratic Union was the United States' favorite rebel front, but after 1977 it was not an affective military force. In 1984-5 the State Department considered supporting the TPLF, but rejected it as too left-wing. Military support for the Ethiopian People's Democratic Alliance, a conservative organization of exiles, was entertained but rejected because of its lack of a military presence in Ethiopia.

amendment, thereby removing the formal obstacles to the far larger amounts of official development assistance, the idea was given a cold reception.

Other western countries' relations with Ethiopia cooled over the same period, though none went so far as withdrawing full diplomatic accreditation and suspending all development assistance.

Western Humanitarian Assistance 1980-84

Throughout the 1980s, all US assistance to Ethiopia was humanitarian aid.

Between 1977 and 1980, the US provided on average \$15 million official assistance to Ethiopia each year, substantially down on previous years. In 1981, that fell to \$2 million and in 1982, to less than \$1 million. It was planned to phase out bilateral assistance altogether in 1983, but in fact USAID responded to requests from humanitarian agencies, and assistance rose to \$6 million in 1983 and \$18 million in 1984.⁴ Other western donors such as Great Britain cut their programs in similar proportion in 1980/1, though were quicker to increase them afterwards. By contrast, in 1985, the US gave \$142 million and in 1990, \$177 million.

The United Nations was, comparatively speaking, much more generous. While overall assistance stagnated between 1979 and 1982, the major UN agencies (World Food Program, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, UN Development Program and UNICEF) all increased their assistance substantially. From \$13.1 million in 1977 and \$22.6 million in 1979, their donations had trebled to \$67.0 million by 1981. As shown in chapter 5, some of this assistance was aimed at the "rehabilitation" of the war-affected southeastern regions and the return of refugees. This assistance can be criticized for assisting the government's war aims.

While assistance from western Europe stagnated, aid from the European Commission increased over the same period. The EC aid program to Ethiopia was described by an ex-US Charge d'Affaires in these terms:

[It] seemed less a product of thought than of bureaucratic momentum and badly oversimplified logic: the EEC had a fund to aid needy Third World countries, Ethiopia was a large and exceptionally needy Third World country, ergo the EEC program for Ethiopia.⁵

⁴ Figures from Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

⁵ Korn, 1986, p. 58.

EC assistance to Ethiopia grew steadily from \$4.2 million in 1977 to \$41.5 million in 1981. (It reached \$153.4 million in 1988.) Like the UN assistance, the program was little influenced by the human rights considerations that affected US policy at its best. The only EC country to increase its aid substantially over the period was Italy, which donated an average of over \$30 million each year during 1980-2.

In 1983, all western donors increased their bilateral aid programs to Ethiopia, and overall assistance rose from \$221 million to \$361 million. An appeal by British voluntary agencies for famine relief donations in March 1983 was considered a success, though the amounts given were small compared to what was to come later. In 1984 overall aid levels topped \$400 million and in 1985 reached nearly \$800 million.

When the Ethiopian famine became a matter of domestic political interest in the West, one of the questions which was repeatedly asked was: why had not the western countries responded sooner? The above account makes it clear that there had been a response, albeit a selective one. For a famine of 1970s proportions, the assistance would have been adequate. As it was to turn out, the amounts given were far less than needed. The US government was notably ungenerous.

Some donors claimed that their tardy response was due to the Ethiopian government concealing the famine. But, while it was certainly the case that between April and September 1984 the Ethiopian government had been preoccupied with the preparations for the tenth anniversary celebrations for the revolution, and had been anxious to conceal the famine from its own people and from visiting journalists, this period was the exception rather than the rule.⁶ Until March 1984 the government was quite frank about the existence of a famine -- Colonel Mengistu even mentioned it in his 1983 May Day speech -- and at all times the RRC was publishing figures of people in need and amounts of food required. There were no fewer than 21 warnings of impending famine from March 1981 to October 1984 by RRC and relief agencies. Western governments were well-provided with official information about the developing famine.

Why was the response small relative to the real need? There are three reasons, which range from a genuine attempt to grapple with an insoluble moral dilemma, to behaving in a frankly cynical and unethical manner.

⁶ See: Article 19, *Starving in Silence: A Report on Famine and Censorship*, London, 1990.

⁷ Peter Cutler, "The Development of the 1983-85 Famine in Northern Ethiopia," PhD Thesis, London, 1988, pp. 365-7.

At the cynical end of the spectrum, Ethiopia was seen as a cold war enemy that was engaging in gratuitous abuse of the west, and thus deserved to be shut off from any assistance. The attitude was that if Ethiopia needed assistance, it should turn to its patron the USSR. Thus in early 1984, when the US Congress drafted a bill mandating aid to Ethiopia, President Reagan attached to it an amendment requesting military assistance to El Salvador and the Nicaraguan *contras*.

This policy subsequently came in for much criticism by the media and humanitarian agencies, and was at times even equated with having caused the famine. It did not of course cause the famine, though generous assistance provided earlier would certainly have prevented much suffering.

A second reason for the lack of response was a degree of skepticism about the figures produced by the RRC. The figures for people in need were produced with an exactness that appeared spurious (with hindsight, correctly so), and no opportunity for cross-checking. They were widely held to have been inflated in order to attract western aid. As has been shown, at times they were certainly mendacious. While the specifics of the distortions of the figures were not always known, the general fact of their manipulation was understood.

This justifiable skepticism combined with a lack of understanding of the dynamics of famine (specifically, few appreciated the fact that starvation is the end result of a very long process of destitution) and with a general cynicism to produce a climate of indifference in the upper echelons of the aid community. At different times in the development of the famine, relief officials were heard to say:⁸

Every year I have been here for the last four to five years they have said that several million people were facing food shortages. If this was true, at least a million would have died by now. (World Food Program [WFP] official)

If we see the figures we tend to divide by ten -- maybe that is a very cynical attitude. If there is a very bad year, we might add ten per cent. (European Community official)

The RRC says it will put on a show and it puts on a flop. (Canadian official, after being given a guided tour of a famine-stricken region)

⁸ Quoted in: Cutler, 1988, pp. 362-3, and Peter Gill, *A Year in the Death of Africa: Politics, Bureaucracy and the Famine*, London, 1986, p. 32.

This attitude even continued into 1985:

How many do you think died in 1984? I would fervently hope that it was less than one million. But, frankly, to have believed those March figures from the RRC, there should have been three million dead. (WFP official)

Time and again, the RRC was accused of "crying wolf." This turned out not to be the case. However, as this report has demonstrated, the major reason why the famine developed into the cataclysm that it did was not that western aid was tardy or inadequate, but that the Ethiopian government insisted on pursuing a set of military and economic policies that seriously aggravated the problem. The aid agency officials were, for the most part, not well-informed about these policies, and were thus unaware of their likely consequences. This ignorance both led to an underestimation of the severity of the impending famine (in 1983-4) and a failure to appreciate what kind of response was really required (in 1985).

The third reason for withholding aid is the most legitimate. It assumes that western governments were aware of the government's policies which were creating famine, and were not prepared to underwrite them with funds. The refusal of the US to support UN initiatives to repatriate and "rehabilitate" refugees in southeast Ethiopia during 1979-82 lends credence to this view. The argument would be that the donors were presented with a difficult moral dilemma: were they to provide assistance to mitigate human suffering, knowing that the underlying causes of that suffering would not be affected, and might even be strengthened or legitimized by their assistance? Or should they refuse to intervene until basic conditions for the neutrality and accountability of relief were met, and the policies creating the suffering were changed? This is a genuine dilemma and one with no easy solution.

There were undoubtedly some individuals in the major western donor agencies who were aware of this dilemma. However, they were not the ones who were dictating policy. As a result, the central issues of Ethiopian government culpability in the famine were never addressed.

In the first instance, the allegations of the abuse of humanitarian aid did not consist in documenting its use as a counter-insurgency tool, but instead consisted of claiming that it was being diverted to the military. Aid was, of course, being diverted to the military (see chapter 10), but it was relatively easy for RRC officials to impress any visiting officials and diplomats and "prove" that the allegations were unfounded.

In March 1983, the Canadian Ambassador to Ethiopia stated that there was no evidence of any diversion of food. Britain's Overseas Development

Administration endorsed this view in April. In May-June there was a visit from a delegation from the European Parliament, which failed to uncover any diversion. In March 1984, a bipartisan committee of the US Congress also failed to find evidence of misallocation, and shortly afterwards a mission from the US General Accounting Office pronounced the rate of diversion to be within acceptable limits. None of these investigations visited rebel-held areas or was able to travel independently of official guides. Several were primarily concerned with the issue of whether relief food had been re-exported to the USSR.

The sustained ability to pursue the marginal issue of food diversion, and still not get to the bottom of it, continued into 1985/6. The western donors would have been better advised to investigate whether the government was pursuing a set of policies that created famine conditions. The US was the only government to do so, and then only in 1985, which was too late.

Human Rights and Famine, 1985: UN and US Approaches

The sudden media interest in the Ethiopian famine in October 1984 and afterwards radically changed the West's relations with Ethiopia.

In 1985, all western donors increased their assistance to Ethiopia substantially. Assistance to Ethiopia was extremely generous. The US became the country's largest donor. US assistance was all -- with a small exception -- directed through non-governmental organizations. The details of the programs can be criticized, but not the fact of the generosity and the willingness to support a people whose government was engaged in persistent hostility to the US. Other western donors were, however, prepared to give support directly to the government RRC.

The US was the only donor government to undertake an investigation into the human rights aspects of the famine. This investigation, mounted between July and September 1985, has to be seen in the light of the UN role in the famine.

In late 1984, the UN Emergency Office for Ethiopia (UNEOE) was set up, ostensibly to coordinate relief efforts, which were becoming extremely complex as a result of proliferation of donors and agencies. It was frequently turned to as an authoritative voice on issues to do with the diversion of food, forcible resettlement, and other abuses. Rather than investigating the abuses, UNEOE consistently concealed disturbing evidence produced by its own monitors. Its role has been described thus:

UNEOE's main function was to act as a "screening device", giving the appearance of competent action in response to famine but not

compromising its actual position in Addis Ababa by unduly antagonizing the host government ... it would have been as embarrassing for the donors who had entrusted resources to the Ethiopian government as it was for the government itself to have aid misallocation exposed.⁹

Mr Kurt Jansson, head of UNEOE during 1984/5, continued to play this role even after leaving his position, as will be evident from reading his account of the famine.¹⁰

Some members of the US Congress were unhappy with the UN whitewashing of the Ethiopian government's culpability. In late July 1985, Representative Toby Roth (R., Wisconsin) introduced an amendment to the foreign aid bill, the International Security and Cooperation Act of 1985.¹¹ President Reagan had to determine within 30 days of signing the bill whether the Ethiopian government was (1) conducting "a deliberate policy of starvation of its people" and (2) failing to grant its citizens "fundamental human rights." If the President found the Ethiopian government guilty on both counts, the US would be obliged to impose a trade embargo that would cover all exports save emergency humanitarian aid. The bill was signed on August 8. It was to raise an insoluble moral dilemma, and be the most severe test of the US policy towards Ethiopia.

In early August, UNEOE released a report authored by Kurt Jansson, consisting of a "comprehensive review" of the relief operations in Eritrea and Tigray. Jansson and other leading aid officials, including a US diplomat and RRC director Dawit Wolde Giorgis had spent four days in their inquiry, which was confined to a few garrisons in government held areas -- no contact was made with ERA and REST. (During its entire lifespan, UNEOE made no effort to direct any assistance to ERA and REST at all.) The report concluded that 75 per cent of the affected people in Eritrea and Tigray were being reached from the government side. This was manifestly untrue (see chapter 11).

Rebuttals of the report by ERA and REST were forthcoming in the following days. As has been shown, it was produced at a time when the government was directing only one twentieth of the relief to Tigray, which had one third of the affected population. It had just completed a bloody

⁹ Cutler, 1988, p. 408.

¹⁰ Kurt Jansson, Michael Harris and Angela Penrose, *The Ethiopian Famine*, London, 1987.

¹¹ This account owes much to: Jonathan B. Tucker, "The Politics of Famine: US Foreign Policy in Ethiopia, 1982-1985," mimeo, 1985.

offensive in Tigray and was preparing a massive offensive in Eritrea. Nevertheless, UNEOE rejected these dissenting voices.

UNEOE had not addressed the dilemma of whether to channel assistance, no questions asked, into the government side of the war zone. It was prepared to endorse the ten per cent contribution to survival represented by aid, without questioning the role of the government in attacking the other 90 per cent.

USAID administrator Peter McPherson was asked to prepare the US report for the President. For the most part he accepted the UNEOE report's conclusions, but with significant reservations. On August 24 he visited Addis Ababa for three days, and then went on to Khartoum. He announced that most of the needy were being reached from the government side. He did not mention (and perhaps did not know -- the subsequent report only gives distribution figures up to July) that RRC deliveries to Eritrea and Tigray had fallen 85 per cent since the UNEOE mission. McPherson also mentioned that the US was supporting cross-border relief operations too. The US support for the cross-border operation was indeed more generous than any other donor, but it fell short of both promises made and real need.

The report was released on September 7.¹² It accused the government of deliberate policies that "have no doubt caused vast and unnecessary suffering, including starvation," and documented a number of these policies. But it also said that the evidence did not show that the government was "at this time conducting a deliberate policy of starvation." The carefully-chosen inclusion of the words "at this time" indicated that the investigator was prepared to believe that the government had been pursuing such a policy until recently -- and implicitly trusted that the government's policy had now changed for good. As chapter 10 has shown, the Ethiopian government was at this very moment beginning to realize the asset that it now had in the form of relief food, and was changing its counter-insurgency strategy in Eritrea accordingly -- though scarcely so in Tigray.

The essential problem with the inquiry was not that it was cursory, but that it was essentially asking the wrong question. The aim of the military policy was not to create starvation *per se*, but to create a population without any independent means of livelihood -- i.e. to create a choice between starvation and submission for the civilian population living in areas controlled by the rebel fronts. Without international aid, the policy would be tantamount to starvation, but with that aid, it need not be, while still meeting the same military and political goals. The deeper issue was: Was

¹² Presidential Determination No. 85-20, "Determination with Respect to Ethiopia," September 7, 1985.

the Ethiopian government engaged in a war against the economic, social and political fabric of Eritrea and Tigray, and on what terms was it prepared to provide assistance to the people? The Ethiopian government could -- barely -- escape the charge of using starvation as a weapon in August 1985, but it could not escape these other charges. The Presidential Determination implicitly recognized this, concluding:

[The amendment] does not call for any determination concerning the past conduct and policies of the Ethiopian Government concerning starvation of its people. Nor does it call for an evaluation of policies that may have had political or military purposes, but which nevertheless caused increased starvation. The Government's past conduct, and the effects of its policies, are matters of grave concern, even though the evidence on these subjects cannot justify a determination under this statute.

The US administration could justifiably have returned a verdict of "guilty" and imposed an embargo on Ethiopia -- and indeed gone further and cut humanitarian assistance programs on the government side. This would have also provided a *post hoc* justification for the earlier scaling down of aid. However, the administration chose not to do so, and also not to defend its earlier policy on those grounds.

The pragmatic humanitarian rationale behind the US decision to reject the charge that the Ethiopian government was using starvation was that at this point it was necessary to deliver aid to the hungry, no matter what. The US was also providing cross-border assistance to ERA and REST, and as the rebel-held areas expanded, USAID support to these organizations grew to eclipse assistance given through the government side. (The same was never true of other major donors such as the European Community, let alone the UN.) The political rationale was a domestic one: since BandAid and Live Aid, it was necessary in terms of domestic politics to be seen to be giving generously. As television cameras and politicians could not visit rebel-held areas (though they did go to refugee camps in Sudan), it was necessary for US assistance to have a high media profile in government-held areas.

Although it is possible to criticize the details of the assistance program to Ethiopia after 1985, the essential fact was that the US gave assistance generously, where it was needed, and limited that assistance to humanitarian aid. By 1990, Ethiopia was receiving the largest amount of US assistance of any country in Africa -- without even full diplomatic representation or a USAID mission.

The involvement of the OAU also deserves mention. The Chairman of the OAU, President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, was pressured to take an initiative to negotiate a safe passage agreement for relief aid in the war zone. President Nyerere declined, fearing that the precedent of giving even a small degree of *de facto* recognition to insurgent groups (and in the case of the EPLF, secessionists) would be contrary to the common interest of African governments. The OAU, which has its headquarters at Addis Ababa, took no further part in initiatives to relieve the famine, curtail human rights abuses, or promote peace.

Western Assistance after 1985

During the 14 years of Mengistu's rule, western assistance to the country grew from \$105 million to over \$1 billion. Most of this aid was disbursed without the same scruples that informed the US assistance program at its best. Because of the artificially low official exchange rate, an equivalent or larger amount was contributed direct to the Ethiopian treasury.

In 1986 and 1987, western assistance to Ethiopia dropped slightly, but by 1988 it surpassed 1985 levels, and in 1989 topped \$1 billion. The main stimulus to the increased levels of assistance was continued appeals for humanitarian relief by the Ethiopian government on account of drought. The appeal for 1987/8 was the most successful -- more than one million tons of grain was donated, enough to feed the entire "at risk" population with extra to spare. As only a dwindling proportion of the needy were in government-held areas, especially after April 1988, the pattern continued to be that the less-needy in government-held areas received priority over the more needy in EPLF- and TPLF-held areas.

US assistance was consistently over \$150 million per annum after 1987. US relief aid was sent through both voluntary agencies working on the government side and through ERA and REST. The US also assisted in negotiating the Joint Relief Program for aid to TPLF-held Tigray in 1989/90, and for aid through EPLF-held Massawa to Asmara in 1990/91.

After Massawa was reopened in January 1991, the US stopped committing further food to the cross-border operation, ostensibly on the grounds that such food was no longer necessary because of the opening of the port. This was not the case, because the Massawa operation was not able to provide all the necessary assistance. Suspicions were voiced that USAID acted in this way to bring pressure to bear on the EPLF and EPRDF to negotiate a ceasefire. After aid agencies publicly criticized the decision in early May, it was reversed.

The ban on US development assistance to Ethiopia on account of the Hickenlooper Amendment remained in force. No further investigations

into human rights abuses and their relationship to famine were undertaken, but the US continued to be highly critical of the Ethiopian government's human rights record. In particular, the US government opposed giving assistance to the resettlement program.

European countries provided assistance to an even greater extent: in 1988, the EC and its member countries donated over \$500 million, over half of the entire assistance program to Ethiopia and twenty times the level of 1977. Italian assistance alone was \$246 million in 1988, including generous aid to the "development" project of Tana-Beles, which was coextensive with the Metekel resettlement project.¹³ European countries and the EC were much more reluctant to support the relief effort in rebel-held areas than the US, and the great majority of the assistance was provided to the government side.¹⁴ In 1991, several European donors followed the US in cutting cross-border assistance to ERA and REST. This was not criticized in the same way by voluntary agencies because agency staff recognized that these donors were unlikely to respond to such criticism, and certainly would not respond rapidly -- unlike USAID, which was much more sensitive to pressure.

European assistance included direct aid to the government, notably to the RRC during 1985 and afterwards. There is no evidence for a significant withholding of aid on human rights grounds. The only issue of internal policy which was raised was economic liberalization in the years after 1988.

Assistance from the principal UN agencies to Ethiopia grew from \$107.6 million in 1985 to \$155.8 million in 1988. Only in 1991 did UN assistance first flow to rebel-held areas, when the opening of the EPLF-held port of Massawa was accompanied by an agreement to allow half of the food to be distributed by ERA. As in the case of European assistance, human rights considerations do not appear to have influenced aid levels. On several occasions, the UN appealed for assistance to be given to the resettlement program, on the grounds of preventing suffering among the resettled population.

From late 1988 onwards, the Ethiopian government engaged in a concerted campaign to woo the West, in order to obtain increased economic assistance. This led to changes among many Western governments in return. The US, however, only hinted at an improved relationship -- nothing of substance changed.

¹³ As detailed in chapter 12, in 1985, the Metekel project was killing ordinary people faster than the greatest assaults of the famine.

¹⁴ EC assistance was legally constrained by the provisions of the Lome Convention, to which Ethiopia is a signatory.

The corollary of generous western assistance to Ethiopia was that aid was given to neighboring countries such as Sudan and Somalia in a similarly uncritical manner. In the case of Somalia, much of the assistance destined for refugees was used to feed soldiers and militiamen loyal to the Somali government.

Ethiopia under Perestroika

Despite the ambitions of Soviet cold-war strategists, President Mengistu refused to be a simple vassal of the USSR. Certain policies, such as the delayed formation of the Workers' Party of Ethiopia, were opposed by his Soviet advisors. In the late 1980s, Mengistu was also impervious to the changes taking place in the USSR under President Gorbachev. He is reported to have prohibited talk of both *perestroika* and *glasnost*, and certainly he ignored advice from Soviet economists about the need for economic reform in 1987. The USSR showed increasing impatience with President Mengistu's unreconstructed Stalinism, insatiable appetite for military hardware, repeated military disasters, and embarrassing famines, and announced that arms deliveries would be cut off when existing contracts expired in March 1991. Arms deliveries continued up until that date, so that the warning never actually impeded Mengistu's military strength; he was no straightforward "victim of *perestroika*."

However, the Soviet declaration that the line of credit was finite struck a psychological blow. Together with the military debacles in Eritrea and Tigray, this encouraged the opposition and contributed to the attempted coup in April 1989 and the "change in direction" whereby Marxism was formally abandoned in March 1990. It also forced Mengistu to look elsewhere for military and economic assistance.

Israel and the Falasha Issue

Under Haile Selassie, Ethiopia had close relations with Israel. Israel's primary interest at that time was a strategic one — it was concerned about the growth of militant Arab states in Sudan and on the shores of the Red Sea. Israel was supporting the Anyanya insurgents in southern Sudan through Ethiopia. A secondary concern was the population of Ethiopian Jews, the Falasha.

The Falasha are a small group who numbered about 50,000 in 1980. They lived in northern Gonder and adjoining areas. They refer to themselves as *Beita Israel* ("House of Israel") or *Kayla*, an Agau word of uncertain interpretation. Their origins are uncertain and controversial; most scholars regard them as belonging to the Agau ethnic group, who inhabited

northern Ethiopia before the arrival of the Tigrayans and Amhara. Their Judaism incorporates the Pentateuch but neither the Mishnah nor Talmud; their religious language is Ge'ez (ancient Ethiopic). The Israeli Rabbinate was, until 1973, unsure of the legitimacy of their claim to Judaism. The Falasha traditionally aspired to migrate to the Holy Land.

Until the revolution the Falasha were not allowed to own land, and made their living primarily from occupations such as pottery and craftwork; they were also subjected to various forms of discrimination. In other respects they were relatively fortunate; for instance their area of northern Gonder was little-affected by the droughts of 1983-4 and continued to produce food surpluses.

In the 1970s, the plight of the Falashas aroused concern among Israelis and Jewish Americans, who lobbied for them to be allowed to migrate to Israel.

After the revolution, the Dergue aligned itself with left-wing states in the Middle East and north Africa, and became publicly hostile to Israel – though a low level of contacts between the two governments always continued. From 1978 to 1988, Ethiopia's closest African ally was Libya, which provided military and technical assistance, and the Palestine Liberation Organization was given the use of an "embassy" in central Addis Ababa. Israel, which had expressed repeated concern over the plight of the Falashas was rebuffed several times.

In 1984/5, Israel sponsored "Operation Moses" whereby Falasha were encouraged to leave Ethiopia and migrate to Sudan as refugees, from where they were airlifted to Israel. This clandestine operation was terminated in early 1985 when it became public in Sudan, which is a member of the Arab League and officially a supporter of the Palestine Liberation Organization. After the exodus was made public, it was condemned by the Ethiopian government.

By November 1989, Ethiopia had reversed its position: an Israeli Ambassador was accredited, and the Libyans were close to being expelled.¹⁵

The emigration of Falasha direct from Ethiopia to Israel started in 1989. In return for allowing the Falasha to emigrate, Ethiopia received weapons and military instructors. Israeli officials at different times admitted to having supplied small arms, non-lethal military technology, and training

¹⁵ A bomb explosion in Addis Ababa was blamed on the Libyans. Later, the Ethiopian government was to accuse the Libyans of supporting the EPRDF.

in counter-insurgency,¹⁶ and at other times denied giving any assistance. However, a confidential congressional staff memo leaked to *Washington Jewish Week*¹⁷ confirmed that in late 1989 about 100 cluster bombs were supplied, which the Ethiopian air force was particularly eager to have. President Jimmy Carter said to Israeli Knesset member Dedi Zucker: "You don't need to sell Mengistu fragmentation bombs in order to persuade him to let your people go."¹⁸ Cluster bombs were used in the bombing of civilian targets in Eritrea including Massawa, causing large numbers of civilian casualties.

Between 1989 and May 1991, the Ethiopian government repeatedly used the Falasha population as pawns to obtain arms. The US government consistently opposed the delivery of arms to Ethiopia, and was particularly hostile to the Israeli sale of cluster bombs, because these had been developed with US technology. This opposition appears to have prevented the further delivery of cluster bombs by the Israeli government from early 1990 onwards.

Almost the entire Falasha population was drawn from Gonder to Addis Ababa in 1990 in the expectation of resettlement in Israel. They abandoned their farms and livelihoods. Because the Ethiopian government allowed only a very slow rate of exodus, many were forced to remain in Addis Ababa for a long period, without adequate shelter or food.

The US expressed particular concern for the Falasha population, and repeatedly raised the question of their freedom to emigrate to Israel with the Ethiopian authorities. The underlying reason for this concern was pressure brought by the pro-Israel lobby on congress and the administration, and accompanying media attention.

In the dying days of the Mengistu regime, the Israeli government mounted a dramatic airlift known as "Operation Solomon" to bring the remaining Falasha from Addis Ababa to Israel. This was successfully completed before the EPRDF occupation of the city, which, it was feared, would lead to disorder, reprisals against the Falasha, and restrictions on their emigration by the new government. In the event, the EPRDF occupation led to none of these things for the small number of Falasha remaining behind.

¹⁶ For example: Israeli ambassador to Ethiopia, Mr Meir Joffe, interviewed by Richard Dowden on British TV, Channel 4, *The World this Week*, June 2, 1990.

¹⁷ July 12, 1990.

¹⁸ Quoted in: *Return*, April/May 1990.

Peace Negotiations

In 1990 and 1991, along with other intermediaries, the US was active in convening a succession of negotiations between the government and the rebel fronts. Given continued though declining Soviet patronage of Ethiopia, and very limited US economic or strategic interest in the country, this involvement was remarkable. The US agenda appeared to reflect its concern with the Falashas, the provision of relief, and a commitment to the resolution of conflict by negotiation. With the ending of the cold war, strategic interests were fast waning; the only remaining political commitment of significance was the maintenance of Ethiopia's territorial integrity -- i.e., opposition to the independence of Eritrea.

During the first months of the Gulf crisis of August 1990–February 1991, Ethiopia held a seat on the UN Security Council. In order to ensure the votes were carried in its favor, the US cut deals with several other members of the Security Council, notably China. Ethiopia was however in a weak position to exact terms from the US: it declared its opposition to Saddam Hussein in the very first days of the crisis (and attempted to brand the EPLF as an Iraqi pawn), and was begging for US and Israeli assistance already. The Ethiopian government had some successes: a meeting took place between Foreign Minister Tesfaye Dinka and US Secretary of State James Baker, the highest level meeting between officials of the two countries since Mengistu seized power, and the US softened its opposition to some World Bank loans to Ethiopia. However, apart from these developments and some reassuring diplomatic platitudes, US–Ethiopia relations remained cool.

The US administration does, however, deserve criticism for a rather clumsy attempt to portray the government and rebel fronts as equally responsible for human rights abuses. Presumably this distortion of the facts was made in order to further the peace negotiations. According to the Department of State *Country Report on Human Rights Practices* for 1990:

Both government and the various insurgent movements, notably the EPLF and TPLF, have practiced forced conscription, imprisonment without recourse, violence against civilian populations, torture, and extrajudicial killing. Women have fallen victim to rape and abuse by government and rebel soldiers, as both sides loot and pillage.¹⁹

¹⁹ Department of State, "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1990," p. 118.

While the rebel fronts have certainly been guilty of abuses, the failure to distinguish between their record and that of the government is a significant shortcoming. Ironically, in May 1991, the US government praised the EPRDF for its treatment of civilians.

The US came to play a crucial role in the final days of the Mengistu government. Assistant Secretary of State Herman Cohen was due to convene a meeting between representatives of the government, the EPLF, EPRDF and OLF in London in mid-May, in order to negotiate a ceasefire. If this were successful, a second round of negotiations was envisaged, which would establish the terms of a transitional government. The meeting was postponed to May 27 at the instigation of the rebel fronts, almost certainly because they recognized their military supremacy (which the US and Ethiopian government had consistently underestimated) and wanted to press home their advantage before the talks began. Their victories caused Mengistu to flee on May 21, and the army to disintegrate over the following week. In the final days, the US publicly appealed to the EPRDF not to advance on Addis Ababa before the talks were concluded in an effort to forestall the massive bloodletting that it was feared might occur if the EPRDF encountered strong resistance.

As it happened, the peace talks convened in the Berkshire Hotel in London on a morning when Acting-President Tesfaye Gebre Kidan had lost effective control of the remnants of the army, and Addis Ababa was almost completely undefended. The EPLF had taken Asmara and Assab in the previous three days. After consulting with the four parties, the US asked the EPRDF to take control of Addis Ababa, to prevent a breakdown in law and order. The government delegation then withdrew in protest. The US was later accused by some opposition groups which had been left out of the ceasefire talks of having "given the keys" of Addis Ababa to the EPRDF; the EPRDF replied that "the door was already open" -- i.e. that there were no military obstacles remaining to its victory. Simultaneously, the US also dropped its longstanding demand for the maintenance of Ethiopia's "territorial integrity," and accepted the EPLF demand for a referendum on the issue of Eritrean independence.

The US made clear its conditional support for the transitional government of the EPRDF and EPLF. The conditions were that a political conference should be held by July 1 in which non-combatant political forces should also be represented, and that multi-party elections be held within one year (this was later extended to two years). Herman Cohen described the conditions as "no democracy, no cooperation." This principle can only be applauded, though it remains to be seen if the US consistently applies it in future dealings with Ethiopia and other African countries. If it had been applied by the US, the European Community and the United Nations

over the previous thirty years many of the tragedies which fell Ethiopia would have been avoided.

AFRICA WATCH'S RECOMMENDATIONS

I. To the Ethiopian Government and Eritrean Administration:

1. Ratify international instruments safeguarding the rights of civilians in armed conflict

Ethiopia is a party to the Geneva Conventions of 1949. Common Article 3 of these four Conventions addresses conflicts that are not of an international character and hence governs the relations between a government and insurgent forces.¹ This requires non-combatants to be treated humanely by all sides in an internal conflict, and prohibits under any circumstances:

- * Violence to life and person, in particular murder of any kind, mutilation, cruel treatment and torture;
- * Taking of hostages;
- * Outrages upon personal dignity, in particular, humiliating and degrading treatment;
- * The passing of sentences and the carrying out of executions without previous judgement pronounced by a regularly-constituted court, affording all the judicial guarantees which are recognized as indispensable according to international standards.

The Additional Protocol on the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts (Protocol II), adopted in 1977, codifies in greater explicit detail the internationally-acceptable standards for the conduct of civil wars. Though Ethiopia is not a party to this protocol, the standards which it lays down are generally applicable to the conflicts in that country under customary international law. Africa Watch calls upon the Ethiopian government to sign and ratify this protocol and abide by all its terms.

Customary international law prohibits attacks against the civilian population in internal conflicts. This principle was adopted by unanimous

¹ The other articles in the Convention apply expressly only to international conflicts.

vote at the UN, in General Assembly Resolution 2444, December 1969. Africa Watch calls upon the Ethiopian government to affirm its determination to abide by this principle.

Africa Watch calls upon any future government of Eritrea to sign and ratify the Geneva Conventions, the Additional Protocols, and affirm its determination to abide by the principle of Resolution 2444.

2. Call to account those principally responsible for human rights abuses in war

The transitional government headed by the EPRDF has indicated that it intends to try members of the former regime for the human rights violations they have committed, in accordance with international standards. Africa Watch welcomes this commitment. The EPLF administration of Eritrea has indicated that it has similar intentions, but has not made a public commitment. Africa Watch urges it to do so.

In all cases, we call for great care to see to it that the manner in which such prosecutions and conducted embodies the rule of law.

It is a right of victims of human rights abuse that those responsible for committing the abuses be brought to justice. Only the victims of abuses have the right to forgive the abuser; it is not for a government to do so.

It is essential that prosecutions for human rights abuses should be conducted in a manner that respects both the substance and the appearance of justice and therefore is likely to strengthen the rule of law and the legal process itself.

Those principally responsible for gross human rights abuses should be prosecuted for the crimes they have committed according to the relevant domestic law. The trial may take place either in the ordinary courts or before a tribunal specially convened for the purpose. In either case, it is essential that international standards of due process of law be adhered to. The defendant should be allowed a defense counsel of his or her own choice, should have free access to that counsel, should be allowed sufficient time to prepare a defense, and should be allowed to summon and cross-examine witnesses.

It is important that the desire to bring as many as possible of those principally responsible for gross abuses to court should not lead to the adoption of a lower standard of proof, or the abrogation of due process. A few prosecutions of those with the highest level of responsibility for the most grave abuses, conducted according to internationally-recognized standards, are more important than many conducted against lesser offenders according to lower standards.

3. Award compensation to the victims of human rights abuses and their families

Those who have been subject to human rights abuse, or their families in the case of the victim having been killed, should be entitled to compensation. The payment of compensation should be conditional only on the proof that an abuse has been committed, it should not be necessary to identify the individual responsible or obtain a criminal conviction of that individual.

4. Set up a Human Rights Commission

Africa Watch urges both the transitional government headed by the EPRDF and the EPLF administration of Eritrea to set up Human Rights Commissions. While the precise structure and mandate of these commissions is a subject open to discussion, Africa Watch believes that the following conditions should be met:

- (1) The Commission should take as its first task the investigation of past human rights abuses. The purpose of this is two-fold. One is to obtain evidence that can help to obtain criminal convictions against those who have committed such abuses. The second is to investigate the general background to the abuses, so that recommendations can be made to the government for institutional and legal safeguards for the future protection of human rights.
- (2) The Commission should be an independent body, composed of citizens who are widely respected for their integrity and their commitment to human rights, with wide powers to decide what issues and incidents to investigate, to launch and carry through investigations of its own, to send investigative missions to different parts of the country and abroad, to summon witnesses and to take necessary precautions to ensure the protection and/or anonymity of witnesses. It should have the staff and budget to carry out these tasks. It should be able to recommend the criminal prosecution of any individual it finds to be responsible for abuses.
- (3) The proceedings of the Commission should be public, so far as is possible and is consistent with the security of witnesses and the need to ensure that the rights of the accused are protected. The findings of the Commission and the reasons for its decisions

should be regularly aired on television and radio and in the print media.

- (4) A permanent Commission should operate as a standing body to investigate human rights abuses. It should be composed and empowered according to the same criteria as the Commission to investigate past abuses.

5. Guarantee and safeguard freedom of movement and prohibit non-voluntary relocation

The transitional government headed by the EPRDF has lifted restrictions on internal travel. Those restrictions must not be re-imposed. The EPLF should lift any such restrictions. Programs of non-voluntary relocation should not be implemented, and people must be allowed to leave resettlement sites and government villages where they have previously been relocated without hindrance or threat of reprisal.

In the exceptional situations when overriding considerations of physical security warrant the relocation of a population, this must be done only under the following conditions:

- (1) Compensatory economic and health assistance is provided to mitigate the adverse effects of the relocation and prevent unnecessary suffering.
- (2) The relocation is strictly temporary and is followed by a program of assisted voluntary return to the previous habitations as soon as possible. The decision to return and its timing should be made in consultation with representatives of the relocated population, and in accordance with their wishes as far as possible.

6. Affirm the principle of free access to humanitarian assistance for all people

The new government in Ethiopia and the administration in Eritrea should affirm the principle that all civilians should have free access to humanitarian relief.

7. Adopt and enforce guidelines on recruitment to the Armed Forces

Africa Watch takes no stand on conscription *per se* and has no objection in principle to the National Military Service Proclamation of

1983. However, the implementation of that proclamation fell far short of the principles of the Proclamation, and involved widespread abuses of human rights. Africa Watch urges the establishment of an independent body (perhaps part of the Human Rights Commission) to monitor the practices of recruitment to the armed forces. This body should have the power to intervene when violations of the conscription guidelines occur, in order to release under-age boys or those who have been conscripted in an arbitrary and violent manner. If necessary, such a body should have the power to recommend publicly that conscription be suspended until it can be carried out in accordance with the law.

8. Set up mediation and dispute-settlement commissions to negotiate peaceful solutions to local conflicts in the southwest.

Many of the conflicts in southwest Ethiopia did not consist in the previous government fighting against local resistance, and therefore are not likely to be resolved by the fall of that government. External forces and the ready though selective availability of firearms are in many cases more responsible for the violence. However, the new government has a responsibility to all Ethiopian citizens to ensure that local conflicts are settled in a peaceful manner. Government intervention is warranted. Military intervention to make the warring parties submit by force of arms is not only likely to fail but will, as in the past, involve human rights abuses. Africa Watch therefore calls upon the new government to set up conciliation committees, which will facilitate a peaceful resolution of these conflicts, and will make recommendations for the maintenance of law and order and the continued respect for basic rights.

Africa Watch also calls upon the new government not to undertake programs of forcible settlement of nomads. Any such programs must be strictly voluntary.

9. Set up a Commission of Inquiry into the causes of famine

Famine has clearly been shown to be closely associated with abuses of human rights. Understanding famine is essential to preventing it. This requires an investigation that encompasses a wide range of disciplines, including *inter alia* meteorology, environmental science, agriculture, economics, social anthropology, medicine, demography, political science, military strategy and human rights. Such an inquiry should include an investigation of the manner in which inappropriate assistance, or assistance in the wrong context, can contribute to famine.

This Commission of Inquiry should be empowered to hear evidence from expert witnesses in the disciplines mentioned above, those with a professional involvement in relief and development, employees of international organizations, ordinary Ethiopian citizens, and anybody else it deems appropriate. It should be empowered to launch investigations of its own into neglected aspects of the problem.

This Commission may produce evidence of a type which would warrant a criminal prosecution against certain individuals or institutions for deliberately pursuing a policy intended to cause starvation or other forms of suffering amounting to famine. It is likely to produce evidence which shows that certain institutions acted in an irresponsible and counter-productive manner. This should not however be its main purpose, which should be to produce recommendations about the future strategy for preventing famine, and for combatting it should it occur.

II. To the Aid Donors and Aid Agencies

The following recommendations apply to United Nations organizations, the European Community and bilateral donors such as USAID and Britain's Overseas Development Administration, and to private voluntary agencies.

10. Cooperate with the inquiry into the causes of famine

International aid institutions should cooperate with the Commission of Inquiry into famine. They should be prepared to reveal previously-confidential information about their conduct towards the Ethiopian government and insurgent movements, and, where appropriate, neighboring countries with refugee populations and the former rebel fronts.

Voluntary organizations should also be prepared to cooperate with the inquiry in a similar manner. The International Committee of the Red Cross is the only organization that should be exempt from the responsibility to testify, because fulfillment of its humanitarian mission is closely linked to adherence to standards of confidentiality and impartiality in its statutes.

11. Accept culpability for complicity in human rights abuses where appropriate

If a United Nations agency, or other aid donor or agency is found by the Human Rights Commission to have acted knowingly in a way likely to contribute to the continuation or extension of human rights abuses, it should be prepared to pay compensation in accordance with the principles determined by the Commission. A plea of "acting in good faith" may be taken into consideration in mitigating penalties, but should not be sufficient to indicate lack of guilt.

12. Draw up principles for the conduct of relief operations in situations of human rights abuse and armed conflict

The experience of Ethiopia in the 1980s has clearly shown that the ethic of humanitarian intervention to relieve suffering under any conditions and without preconditions is deeply problematical, and may lead to more suffering in the long run. Africa Watch has no easy answers to the dilemmas raised. However, many of the difficulties can be resolved if humanitarian agencies agree on the human rights preconditions for their work. Such preconditions should include:

- (1) A duty to make public information concerning gross human rights abuses.
- (2) A duty to examine the strategic context of any humanitarian intervention that is taking place in or near to armed conflict or government or insurgent policies of forced relocation or restriction on free movement. The examination should cover such issues as whether the humanitarian assistance is allowing the combatants to consolidate or improve their military or political position. The findings of any such examination should be made public promptly and regularly.
- (3) A public commitment to assist the civilian population of an area, provided there is reasonable security, whatever armed force is in *de facto* control of the area. Thus, if a humanitarian organization has a program in an area which changes from government to insurgent control, the program should continue, subject to the cooperation of the insurgent group (and *vice versa*). It is not necessary for an organization always to work on both sides of a conflict, merely to accept the principle that under these

circumstances it will do so, and to ensure that its aid to one side does not become the basis for denying aid to the other side.

Africa Watch also urges humanitarian organizations and their donors to impose humanitarian conditions on humanitarian aid. A principal condition is that no assistance will be given by the international community to facilitate the displacement of civilians, as displacement itself is an abuse of human rights and a cause of unnecessary suffering, and it should not be aided and abetted.

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For the past thirty years—under both Emperor Haile Selassie and President Mengistu Haile Mariam—Ethiopia has suffered continuous war and intermittent famine until every single province has been affected by war to some degree. *Evil Days*, documents the wide range of violations of basic human rights committed by all sides in the conflict, especially the Mengistu government's direct responsibility for the deaths of at least half a million Ethiopian civilians.

The Ethiopian army and air force have killed tens of thousands of civilians. The notorious urban "Red Terror" of 1977-78 was matched by indiscriminate violence against rural populations, especially in Eritrea and Tigray. Counterinsurgency strategies involved forcibly relocating millions of rural people and cutting food supplies to insurgent areas. These military policies were instrumental in creating famine. The government used relief supplies as weapons to further its war aims. There is now a prospect of lasting peace, but concerns remain such as the demand for justice and the future protection of human rights.